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BUT ONE LOOK HE CAST BEHIND HIM, AND A CRY BROKE FROM HIS LIPS, FOR THERE, UPON
THE TURRET, STOOD A TALL FORM CLAD IN WHITE.

The Sea Viper;

OR,

The Midshipman's Legacy;

A Romance of Florida and Southern Waters.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "THE FLYING YANKEE," "RALPH
ROY," "DIAMOND DIRK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE LEGEND OF STORM CATTLE.

UPON an island key, which serves as a barrier to check the waves that fall upon the main coast of Florida, there stands to-day a crumbling ruin.

A stanch old tower, a massive wall, and a wing or two yet remain to bid defiance to wind and wave; but ere many more years, Time, the inevitable destroyer, will topple them into the sea, and the solid rocks, with their arched subterranean chambers, will alone remain.

Once, in the olden time, a century ago, that old ruin was the home of wealth and refinement, for therein dwelt a Spanish noble and his household.

An exile, 'twas said, he had fled from old Spain in his own vessel, for he was a naval officer, and on the coast of Florida had made his home, building upon that key a massive mansion of stone, and filling it with all the luxuries that wealth could buy.

Rumor had it that the noble was wont to go on long cruises in his fleet brigantine, and there were old sailors who whispered it in port, that there was a vessel afloat strangely like the Spanish noble's that carried the black flag at its peak; but few would believe the idle stories that Don St. Leon was a pirate, and everywhere he visited on the mainland he was received by the settlers with honor, and many were the fair women who hoped to become mistress of Storm Castle, as his wave-washed home was called.

At length the handsome Spaniard's heart was won, and he offered his hand and fortune to a lovely young girl, the daughter of a wealthy planter, whose elegant villa lay inland a league, and yet within view of the turrets of Storm Castle.

Scarcely eighteen years of age, Edna Hammersley seemed rather to fear than love the dark, handsome and stern man who sought to make her his wife; but her father demanded that she should wed *El Capitan*, and the maiden obeyed.

It was a grand wedding, so the legend goes, and Don St. Leon fairly weighted his beautiful bride down with costly gems, and golden trinkets; yet, while smiles were trembling on her lips, and strains of merry music filled her ears, tears filled her heart, for an icy dread of coming evil was upon her, and though scores of lovely women present envied her, she longed to remain as she was, simple Edna Hammersley, for she feared that dark, stern man, who was to guide her destinies through life.

She hoped for joy; she foreboded sorrow to be her lot; why, she could not tell.

To Storm Castle Don St. Leon took his bride, and as they were rowed over the restless waters, the clouds looked black and threatening, for a storm was sweeping down from seaward, and hard pulled the oarsmen to reach the island harbor before it broke upon them.

But the stone stairway was reached at last, and just as Edna's tiny foot touched her island home, the lightning flashed with blinding vividness, and a crash of thunder burst from the inky storm-clouds with a roar that shook the rocks to their foundation.

One loud, piercing shriek of terror broke from Edna's lips, and then she sunk unconscious into the arms of her husband, while the tornado rushed with fearful fury over the sea and shore.

When she recovered consciousness she was in the midst of elegant surroundings, surpassing those of her own handsome home, and above her bent the anxious face of her husband, who, with kind words tried to reassure her, and for his sake she rallied and tried to appear happy, but in vain did she force a smile to her lips as the days went by, and seeing that some strange fear was upon her, Don St. Leon asked her the cause.

"Nothing, oh, nothing! but do take me away from here! I cannot live here in this old pile of rocks," she cried.

Don St. Leon's brow grew dark, but he controlled his temper and told Edna that she was a foolish child.

"Foolish child," she muttered, as she arose and went to one of the windows overlooking the little harbor, "foolish child am I? He little dreams that I saw what passed last night as I stood here in the moonlight! No, no, I am determined not to remain here," and she again turned to her husband and begged him to take her back to her home.

For some moments Don St. Leon paced to and fro, his brow clouded, his lips set, and then he turned toward his wife, and said:

"Edna, remain here a few months longer, at least until one year has passed since I brought you here, and then I swear to you, I will leave this place; ay, I will do more, for I will go with you to Hammersley Hall, send my servants back to Spain, and leave Storm Castle to become a ruin, while we dwell in happiness together beneath the orange groves of Florida; will you make this promise for me, my beautiful wife?"

He had ever been kind to her, and though stern to others, he was not to her, and she would promise, for he was her husband, whatever mystery might hang around his life, and she owed it to him.

"Yes, I promise you to remain here one year," she said sadly, and to her heart again came that icy touch, that foreboding of evil.

Edna kept her promise: she remained in Storm Castle one year; alas! she went from it only through the portals of death, as she died in giving birth to a little son.

Back from the home on the reef went Edna once more, and just one year after that night of storm when she had gone to her husband's island home a bride.

Now the waters were calm as a lake; the setting sun cast a rosy hue upon the sea, tinged

with silver, and with muffled oars the barge headed landward, folds of black velvet trailing in the wake, for beneath the casket, over which the form of a man bent in sorrow, lay the dead wife, going to her last earthly resting-place beneath the orange groves that surrounded Hammersley Hall, where had passed her childhood and girlhood days.

At length the barge reached the shore and the body was borne inland followed by mourning friends, and in an almost fairy garden the casket was lowered into the yawning grave.

The sun went down beyond the western horizon, and the moon lit up the workers as they filled the grave, and its rays fell upon that dark, stern man of mystery, as he stood with bowed head, watching the damp earth hide from view forever the woman he had called wife.

Others turned away one by one from that new-made mound until all but one had gone; and that one was Don St. Leon, who still kept watch, as though loth to leave the fair form that lay beneath his feet, alone in that wild, weird place, surrounded by other dead.

And thus the hours crept by until the moonlight paled and the dawn of day approached; then the grief-crushed man turned away and with uncertain step wended his way to the shore.

There his faithful boat's crew awaited him, and they gazed into his haggard face with deep sympathy in their hearts.

But silently he stepped into the stern sheets, the oars were let fall, and the barge went rapidly through the waters, back to Storm Castle.

Once there, the gloom of the grave still haunted him, and the pall of death rested upon all around him, until with a groan, wrung from his inmost heart, he stepped to the wall and took down a jeweled dagger.

He bared the bright steel blade, and running his fingers caressingly over the keen edges, smiled grimly.

"Here is rest; Edna, to-night I will sleep by thy side in the cold tomb."

The words burst from his lips, as if in joy, and he bared his breast for the stroke, and raised his right arm on high to drive the blade home to his heart.

One instant he stood thus, hesitating, yet in no fear of death, for he wooed its cold, clammy breath; but, as if to dwell momentarily upon his past, and strive with his mortal vision to pierce the future.

And, as he thus stood, like a terrible, yet beautiful statue, there came upon his ears a strange sound; strange indeed for that rugged island home, for it was the faint voice of an infant, a wail, as if of woe.

The stern man started, and, as the door of his room softly opened he turned to behold upon the threshold a woman, bearing in her arms a little babe.

It was the old Scotch nurse, who had nursed his wife in childhood, and now held his child and Edna's in her arms.

Intuitively the woman seemed to know the intention of the man, for advancing quickly she said in a low, kindly tone:

"The mither is gone, sir, and it's to a better land than this; but she has left you this bonnie boy to live for."

The man turned his eyes upon the infant, and its wailing ceased as if the gaze of its father soothed it.

Then the dagger dropped from Don St. Leon's hand and stuck quivering in the floor, while the proud head was lowered until the mustached lips touched the soft forehead, and he cried earnestly:

"I will live for you, my boy, my beautiful baby boy."

The infant had saved his father's life, and true to his pledge to the mother Don St. Leon moved away from his island home, and took up his abode at Hammersley Hall, where he devoted his days to his little son, and left Storm Castle to desolation and ruin.

CHAPTER II.

THE FALSE BEACON.

THE season passed swiftly away, and spring came with its balmy breezes, to deck the grave of the young wife with flowers, and fill the air with fragrance.

The mocking-birds thrilled their sweetest notes amid the orange groves, and all nature seemed joyous once more, for the winter gone by had been a severe one even for that land of the far sunny South.

Standing by the violet-covered mound that marked the resting-place of Edna, was Don St. Leon, his eyes wandering wistfully out over the waters to where earth and sky met leagues away.

His bronzed face seemed even darker than of yore, and his brow wore an habitual cloud, while silver threads mingled with his black hair; but in his eyes was a softer light, and around his mouth no more lingered the almost fierce determination that poor Edna so feared.

Presently his eyes lighted up, as far off upon the horizon, they caught sight of a white sail, heading landward, before a fair wind.

For a long time he stood in silence, watching the coming vessel, and then he said, half aloud:

"She sails well, and seems to be running for a haven before yonder storm overtakes her; but there is but one harbor near where she is heading, and that one is there," and he half-pointed to the gray walls of Storm Castle, a league and a half distant, and looking grim and gloomy in its desolation, for a year had passed since a human foot had trod the island reef.

Continuing to gaze at the approaching sail, and also watching the inky masses of clouds rolling up from the horizon with ominous thunder-mutterings, his face suddenly turned livid, and he gasped forth in hoarse tones:

"Great God! it is the Diablo."

Seemingly overcome by some strange and startling discovery he had made, he leaned against the trunk of an orange tree for support, while great beads of sweat broke out upon his forehead, and his eyes rolled restlessly in their sockets, yet were fixed upon no object.

But the deep crash of thunder caused him to again turn his gaze seaward, and he saw that the waters now reflected the blackness of the heavens, and that a terrible tornado was gathering, to burst with fury upon the land and sea.

And there, still pressing shoreward, under

clouds of canvas, came a swift-sailing brigantine, her prow headed for the Storm Castle, from which she was distant but little more than a league, and seemed striving hard to reach before the winds and waves should burst upon her in fury, and on a lee shore as she was, hold her wholly at their mercy.

As Don St. Leon gazed, like a man staring at some object of horror that had caught his vision, a bright flash broke from the bows of the brigantine, and then, across the waters, borne on the wings of the incoming wind, came the deep boom of a heavy gun.

"Ha! they are firing at the castle to display the signals to guide them in! Bendito little knows that yonder old pile of rocks is as silent as the tomb—ah, there goes another gun; but you cry in vain from your brazen throats, senores."

For a moment he was silent, and then there flashed across his face an expression that was almost fiendish, while through his white teeth came the words:

"I'll do it, by the Holy Virgin!"

With a bound he started for the shore, leaping the hawthorn hedge that surrounded the Eden-like garden, and speeding on as fleet as a deer.

Upon the beach was an old hut, which had been the boat-house when the Storm Castle held dwellers, and in this still remained a life-skiff and oars.

With herculean strength he dragged the boat into the surf, seized the oars, and pulled away from the beach, just as the sun went down, as if chased from sight by the skurrying clouds of midnight blackness.

The waves were each moment growing larger, and each one was crested with a white cap, while afar off upon the sea the fierce tornado was rushing on with a roar that mingled with the deep roll of the thunder, and the echoes of the signal guns from the brigantine.

With giant strength Don St. Leon pulled at his oars, and the skiff bounded over the waves, and soon ran into the little inlet under the lee of the castle.

Springing ashore Don St. Leon ran hastily up to the walls of the stone homestead, and seizing a large rock dashed in the wooden doorway with one heavy blow.

All was dark within, and a current of damp, moldy air rushed out; but unheeding this, the man unhesitatingly rushed into the dark recess and disappeared from view.

Thoroughly acquainted with the interior he kept up the same mad pace, and soon after appeared upon the outer sea wall, holding in his hands a lantern, which he whirled round and round his head.

"Ha! ha! ha! They see it, and there is an answering signal," he cried, as off upon the black sea was visible a circle of light.

Rushing along the sea wall to where it broke off suddenly at the entrance of the channel into the inlet, Don St. Leon came upon a rudely constructed pile of stone, upon the summit of which was a dark-looking object that looked like an iron ball.

Climbing the column of rocks, he worked for an instant in eager haste, and then gave an ex-

clamation of joy as the globe opened, the light showing within a large ship's lantern.

"The Virgin be praised the taper is dry and here is oil—now!" and the next moment a bright light streamed off over the dark waters; but Don St. Leon waited not to see its effect, but, shielding his own lantern, ran back along the wall, and then halting suddenly turned its rays out upon the sea.

Hardly had he done so, when there came to his ears, above the roaring wind and waves, the sound of a distant cheer from a hundred throats, and straining his eyes to their utmost he beheld the white sails of the brigantine now driving landward without dread.

"Ha! ha! ha! She is heading between the lights!" shrieked Don St. Leon, and he danced like a madman as in fiendish glee he watched the coming vessel.

"Come on, Senor Bendito! come on, my brave crew! *Your doom awaits you!*" again he shrieked, and then the tornado burst upon the vessel and hid it from view, while it drove on landward with lightning speed.

Still clutching his lantern, Don St. Leon threw himself flat upon his face to meet the terrific shock, and not a moment too soon, for the fierce winds and rolling waters struck the island reef with a force that made it tremble, and then hurtled on landward, the waves dashing the spray high in air, and roaring hoarsely, as if in savage fury at being checked.

But through all, the daring man upon that wall of rock, held his lantern toward the sea, and the one on the rocky pile, too, burned brightly, luring those who trusted to them, on to ruin.

"Ha! ha! ha! There she comes! Bendito, and comrades, farewell!"

It was more the shriek of a fiend, of a soul that was lost, than of a man on earth, and in demoniacal joy rung out his laughter, as the brigantine was seen, not far distant, driving like a maddened thing of life, right upon the rocky reef, above which towered the walls of Storm Castle.

One instant the beautiful vessel hovered upon the summit of a mighty wave, and then down came the sharp bows with irresistible force, and the crash of timbers, the death-shrieks of her crew, the roaring surf, muttering thunder and howling winds mingled together in one grand, awful chorus.

Along the wall, from end to end, unmindful of the fierce-blowing winds and dashing spray, sped Don St. Leon, his mocking laughter that of a man gone mad.

Reaching the pile of stone, the beacon that had played so false a part to lure the brigantine to ruin, was quickly put out, the hand lantern was hurled into the sea, out of which still came shrieks for aid which no mortal man could give, and then Don St. Leon paced to and fro, his eyes striving to pierce the black waters that broke upon the reef.

For hours he thus walked that dreary wall, until the storm had blown itself out, and the waves no longer ran mountain high; but no longer came a cry for help from the dark depths below, and nowhere visible was the wreck of the brigantine; the fierce waters had scattered

its timbers to fret against the ragged reefs, and its crew had gone to their doom.

Then stretching his hands out before him, and dropping upon his knees, Don St. Leon cried in his deep, ringing voice:

"Bless thee, oh, sea! Brave, beautiful sea, ever will I love thy bright blue waters, in calm or in storm, for what thou hast this night done for me! Bless thee, thou noble old sea!"

Rising quickly, he retraced his way to the castle and disappeared within its portals, which he closed behind him; but in a short while he reappeared at the landward gate and there was the life-skiff awaiting him, for it had been safely moored.

The waves yet ran high, and it was a dangerous trip back over the wild waters to the mainland, but he was a thorough boatman, and ere long dragged the little craft into the little cabin, arranging everything therein as it was before, and feeling confident that the surf that washed around it would obliterate all traces in the sand.

Then, at a quick pace, he retraced his way to the little garden, sprung over the bridge, and soon after disappeared in the orange grove, beneath the shadows of which was the grave of the wife he had so dearly loved.

CHAPTER III.

THE DEATH-SHOT.

SOME twelve years after the scenes related in the foregoing chapter, a youthful huntsman was wending his way slowly through a magnolia forest, searching for game.

He was a lad of fourteen, well-formed, and with a handsome fearless face that was winning in its every expression.

Dressed in a neat hunting-suit, he carried upon his shoulder a silver-mounted deer rifle, and his head was shaded by a Panama straw hat, encircled with a band of gold lace.

At the heels of the youth trotted a hound evidently well trained by his young master, and as a proof of being a crack marksman a string of squirrels hung across the barrel of the rifle.

Suddenly the dog darted forward and reaching the top of a slight hill, along which ran a rustic fence, came to a dead halt, while he uttered a low growl.

"What is it now, Trailer?" asked the youth, as he slung his rifle round ready for use, for the manner of the dog proved to him that he had found larger game than a squirrel.

Ascending the hill with light, quick tread, the dog in the mean time showing evident signs of fear, the youth came upon the scene that caused him to also halt suddenly and stand like a statue, while the string of game dropped from his hand.

From the position he occupied he looked down into a grand park, which he knew surrounded a plantation home, for half a mile distant the white walls of the mansion were visible through the trees.

Here and there in the well-laid-out grounds were rustic arbors and seats, and a crystal stream wound its way along through mossy banks, as it glided to mingle with the waters of the sea two miles distant.

But neither the handsome grounds, the fine

mansion, the winding stream or rustic arbors caused the youth to pause with such suddenness and gaze, as though spellbound, beyond him; but another sight met his eyes.

Not a hundred paces distant, were two human beings, near an arbor that stood upon the banks of the tiny creek.

One of these was crouching down as if in terrible fear, and the other standing upright and with fearless attitude.

The former was a young girl of nine years of age, dressed in a neat, white linen suit, and with a sun hat, decked with flowers falling down her back, yet failing to hide the wealth of red-gold hair that reached below her waist.

A fairylike little beauty, she now crouched down with white face and staring eyes, while before her, standing so as to appear to shield her from some threatened danger, was a youth of twelve; a bold, handsome boy, though his face was now as white as the suit he wore.

And what danger threatened the two children?

One of a terrible, fearful death, for, drawing himself slowly along like a cat creeping upon a bird, was a large panther, the terror of the jungles and everglades of Florida.

He had been noiselessly approaching the children, as they watched their tiny boats glide down the stream, and, full of enjoyment, they had not observed the terrible beast until he was within ten paces of them.

Then the little girl had caught sudden sight of his glossy hide and red mouth, with its glittering teeth.

She could not cry out, but sunk down upon her knees and pointed with trembling hand, and her brother, too, saw the dread monster.

To run he knew would bring the savage animal at once upon them, and with a bound he sprung before his sister, as if to offer his form to shield her from a terrible death.

As the children moved, the panther had arisen to his feet, as though to spring upon them; but seeing them stand still, he crouched down again and continued his slow, crawling, noiseless approach, his fierce eyes glaring upon the prey.

It was at this instant that the young huntsman appeared upon the crest of the hill, and momentarily stood horror-struck at the sight he beheld.

Then his eyes flashed, while his face grew pale and every muscle was nerved for the desperate duty before him.

A glance at the string of squirrels showed that each one had been brought down by a bullet in the head; but could the nerve of the boy hold good when two lives were at stake, and the death of a terrible wild beast depended upon his aim?

Slowly he raised his rifle, his eye measuring the distance, and a frown gathered upon his brow as he noted that it was a long shot at an animal at all times hard to kill.

But he dare not move on, as the panther, discovering him, might make the fatal spring.

So he raised his rifle to his shoulder, his whole form quivering, and with an impatient ejaculation he lowered it, for he felt that his aim would not be sure.

Controlling himself by a mighty effort of

will, he again brought his rifle to a level, and it was as firm as a rock.

Along the gleaming barrel flashed his dark eye, his finger rested upon the trigger, and an instant was the fearful tableau continued, the low growling of the dog at his feet, and the distant break of the surf upon the beach, the only sounds to break the silence.

An instant of fearful suspense, and an instant that was an age to him, and to those two under the basilisk eye of the wild beast.

Then the figure moved, a puff of smoke, a sharp report, a shriek of terror and pain, and the huge animal lay harmless upon the green sward, every muscle quivering in dying agony.

The brave boy hunter had shown an iron nerve and unfailing aim, and had made a death-shot.

CHAPTER IV.

"COMING EVENTS CAST THEIR SHADOWS BEFORE."

As the young rifleman saw the effect of his shot, and that the panther was no longer dangerous, he could not restrain the wild shout of joy that burst from his lips, as waving his hat around his head he bounded down the hill to greet those whom his deadly aim had saved from death.

Seeing that they were no longer facing a fearful doom, the boy and girl with a vitality seldom found in older persons after a terrible nervous shock, rallied quickly and ran to meet their preserver, the little girl in a joyous abandon throwing her arms around the young hunter and kissing him.

"Tell me who you are, please, for we don't know who to thank for saving us," she cried, as she stood by the youth still holding his hand, while the three gazed with the deepest interest upon the dead panther.

"I am Roland St. Leon, and I live at Hammersley Hall," was the quiet answer.

"Both Flora and myself have heard our father's slaves speak of you. They say you can ride like an Indian and sail a boat as well as any fisherman on the coast," answered the boy, gazing with undisguised admiration upon his older companion.

"And I can shoot a rifle too, I am glad to say," said Roland St. Leon with pardonable pride, and he added, turning to the little Flora:

"And you shall have the panther's skin, for I will have it dressed for you. See, I hit him just where I aimed, right in the back of the head. A moment more he would have sprung upon you."

"And then poor Flora and I would have been torn to pieces," remarked the boy with an involuntary shudder; "but come, you must return to the Magnolia Villa with us, and see our father."

"You are then the children of Colonel Randolph, who has lately purchased the Magnolia Plantation?" asked Roland St. Leon.

"Yes, I am Mark Randolph, and this is my sister Flora. Isn't she beautiful?"

The little girl blushed at the open praise of her brother; but Roland frankly replied:

"Yes, she is indeed beautiful; and you are a

brave boy, Mark, to shield your sister as well as you could from harm."

The boy felt proud of praise from the lips of the young hero, and said:

"I had only my knife here to defend us with; but I would have used that until I was dead; but you will come with us to our home, for father will be so glad to see you."

"Do come with us," and Flora gently took the hand of Roland St. Leon, as he seemed to hesitate.

"Well, wait until I load my rifle," and having completed this important duty the three set off for the Magnolia Villa, Traylor trotting at the heels of his young master, yet wearing a dejected look, as though he felt guilty of having done nothing to distinguish himself in the affair with the panther.

"Were you not afraid of the panther?" asked Flora as they went along.

"No, I was afraid I would not kill him at the first shot, for he was the largest I ever saw. I killed a bear a year ago, while out hunting, and I've shot a number of deer; but I never expected to see a panther in these woods. See, there is a vessel going along the coast," and Roland St. Leon halted, and pointed through an open vista of the forest to where the sea was visible, and dashing swiftly along, a rakish-looking schooner.

"Isn't she pretty?" cried Flora, while Mark said, with an air of mystery:

"I think she must be a pirate."

"No, the buccaneers never come in here nowadays, though they did, years ago; that is some coasting vessel; but she has a very saucy look I admit, for an honest craft."

"And there is the Haunted Ruin," said Flora, pointing to where the gray turrets and walls of Storm Castle were visible in the distance.

"That is Storm Castle—I was born there," quickly remarked Roland St. Leon.

"You!" exclaimed both children, in a breath, and gazing with increased wonder upon the youth.

"Yes; my parents lived there, long ago; but it was so gloomy that father moved away to my mother's home, after her death."

"Oh! they tell such strange stories about that place, and our servants all call it the Haunted Ruin," said Flora.

"Yes; people do say it is haunted, I know, but I would not be afraid to go there, for I do not believe much in spooks and spirits; but my father has forbidden me to land upon the island, though I have sailed around it in my boat."

"Oh! Roland, don't go there, for old Aunt Dinah says that years ago the ghosts showed lights there and lured a vessel onto the rocks, and oh! so many dead bodies were found along the beach a few days after the terrible storm that wrecked the ship; and since then no one has dared go out to the ruin, for at night, when the wind blows hard, the shrieks of men can be heard. Oh! it is terrible, Aunt Dinah says," and Flora's large and beautiful eyes stared in superstitious horror at Storm Castle.

"Yes, Flora; they tell strange stories of the castle, and I know that strange sights have been seen there, for I have seen them myself; and there is no man on this coast that would land a

boat on the island; but is not that your father?" and Roland referred to a tall, dignified man with soldierly bearing, who was approaching the spot where they stood.

"Oh, papa!" and away Flora bounded to meet him, and led him toward the two boys who were also advancing.

He was a man of noble presence, and his face was strangely sad in its expression, showing that some deep sorrow had passed over his life and left its imprint on every feature.

Dressed in a blouse suit, he seemed leisurely strolling over the grounds of the plantation, which he had lately purchased from a French exile who had long made it his home, but had gone back to France once more.

An English officer, Colonel Randolph had served in the war against the colonies, but had resigned his commission and settled in America, after which he went to the mother country after his children, Mark and Flora.

This is what was known of him, and that much Roland St. Leon had heard of the new master of Magnolia Villa.

As he listened to the rapid story of Flora, of the danger they had escaped, and the death-shot of Roland, Colonel Randolph's face lighted up with the deepest interest, while it became deadly pale at the nearness his children had been to meeting an awful fate.

Hastily advancing, he seized Roland by both hands, and said earnestly:

"My brave, noble boy, you have laid me under obligations that a lifetime can never repay."

Roland St. Leon felt proud of the praise bestowed upon him, and answered in a few modest words, after which they all returned to see the panther, and the position of affairs at the time of the shot.

Then a picturesque tableau of the terrible reality was gone through with by the children, at the request of the colonel, and again and again was Roland thanked and praised for his nerve and unerring aim.

"Come, I will drive you over to your home, for I wish to tell your father, Captain St. Leon, what a splendid, noble boy he has," said Colonel Randolph, and half an hour after the four were driving rapidly along the highway leading to Hammersley Hall, the panther being on the seat with the negro driver, for Roland insisted that he should have the skin nicely dressed, as a present from him to Flora.

But, although Don St. Leon stood in the library window and saw the carriage rolling up the drive, he suddenly, as his eyes fell upon the occupants, refused to be seen by visitors, excusing himself, to the great surprise and sorrow of Roland, by saying that he was not at home.

"But, father," urged the youth.

A stern look and angry retort checked him.

"I tell you, Roland, to say that I am not at home."

Roland turned away with a sigh, and shortly after the Randolph carriage rolled away, the colonel disappointed at not seeing the father of the brave boy who had saved his children from death.

But from that day a warm friendship sprung up between the children. Alas! how was it to end?

Could those three but have known then, they would have almost prayed that the panther might have received no death-wound from the unerring rifle of Roland St. Leon.

And from that day a change came over the lord and master of Hammersley Hall, for, denying himself to all society, refusing to see any visitors, he lived the life of a hermit in his own home, attended only by a few faithful servants, and seen only by his son and family physician.

There were strange stories in circulation regarding this strange behavior of Don St. Leon, and rumor had it that the stern, mysterious Spaniard had gone mad.

Whether mad or not, these pages will reveal.

CHAPTER V.

THE HAUNTED RUIN.

ONE pleasant afternoon, about a year after the meeting between Roland St. Leon and the Randolphs, a small, cat-rigged sail-boat was cruising along the coast, and heading in a direction that would run it to leeward of the island reef, upon which stood the gloomy Storm Castle, still grim and foreboding in its desolation.

The boat contained but a single occupant, who held the helm in one hand and the sheet-rope in the other, and kept the little craft steadily on its course, unmindful of the stiff breeze then blowing.

Had any one been watching the boat for the past hour, they would have observed that it came out of an inlet that served as a harbor for Hammersley Hall, and from the manner in which the occupant glanced astern as he ran out to sea, it was evident that he seemed to desire not to be seen by any one from the mansion.

Having weathered the point of land that formed the inlet, the boatman had directed his course up the coast, standing far out, as I have said, so as to have the island on which stood Storm Castle between him and the mainland.

With a look of intense interest upon his face, the sailor turned his gaze upon the gloomy walls and turrets of the castle, and said, half aloud:

"I will do it, though I know father will be angry; but I promised Flora I would see if spooks and spirits really did dwell there; but if not, who is it that waves those weird lights at night, and that I saw dancing about on the turret, all clad in white?"

"Well, there is certainly something there, and I am determined to see what it is, for I will not break my word to dear little Flora."

The words of the speaker proved that the occupant of the boat was Roland St. Leon, fearlessly going on a voyage of investigation to the Haunted Ruin, as the Storm Castle was now known far and wide along the coast.

Though no one certainly lived there, ever since that awful night of the storm there had been strange sights seen upon its walls, for ghostly forms, 'twas said, stalked boldly forth on dark nights, swinging lanterns round their heads, and dancing about as if in joyous revel at the fierce storms that swept the sea.

And others told how they could even hear the shrieks of men above the gale, until the superstitious dwellers along the coast believed

that those lost on that fearful night, dwelt in spirit around the place where they had sailed to wreck and ruin, and each night of storm enacted the death-scene over in ghostly form.

Whether every one believed these weird tales of the Haunted Ruin, or not, it was certain that no man, or body of men, had the requisite dare-devil spirit to go out and investigate the stories told.

But a boy was daring what others dare not do, and in disobedience of his father's commands was going to the island, to see if he could clear up the dread mystery and thereby become more of a hero in the beautiful eyes of Flora Randolph.

Having gained a position that placed the island between himself and the mainland, Roland St. Leon boldly put his helm hard down and ran for the harborage under the castle, and the entrance to which was only half a dozen fathoms wide, with rocky walls forming a gateway upon either side.

Upon the end of each wall, was a pile of stone, with a rusty iron globe on top, and these had served as the light-houses to guard the entrance to the basin, which was hardly more than an acre in size, but which was a secure haven when a vessel once entered it.

Half around the basin, in the shape of a crescent, was the castle, with a turret at either end, and one in the center.

Built of large stone, and upon a firm foundation, the castle was a substantial structure, and but for its gloomy look, and isolated position, might have been a pleasant abiding-place; but even with the man who had loved her so devotedly, the reader has seen that poor Edna St. Leon was not happy there.

Running into the channel between the stone walls, Roland put his helm apart and soon his keel grated upon the beach.

Springing ashore, he fastened his boat securely, and then took up his trusty rifle, and a large pistol of the old-fashioned style, saying, to himself:

"If they stand a shot with these, I'll be convinced that they are spirits, and trouble them no more."

It was evident, by his words, that he certainly expected to meet with spooks; but his face was utterly without fear, and his nerves were like iron, as he strode up the rocky hill leading to the wall of the castle.

Having gained it, he crept along cautiously, so as not to be seen from the mainland, and soon came to the sea-entrance, a heavy door, studded with iron nails.

Decay was already at work upon both iron, stone and wood, yet every effort to force an entrance by the gateway was fruitless, and compelled to give it up, the daring boy went around to the eastward of the ruin, knowing that there was a rear entrance, for he had often seen it from the mainland.

This he at length reached, and, after a slight effort of his strength it swung open, revealing only darkness within.

For a moment he hesitated; but setting his lips, he stepped within, and having fully prepared himself for emergencies, he took from his breast-pocket a small lamp, already lighted.

It cast but a sickly glare in the tunnel-like entrance, but nothing daunted, the boy swung his rifle to his back, by a leather strap, and with his pistol in his right hand and the lantern held above his head in the left, he now advanced boldly into the subterranean recesses of the gloomy structure.

A dozen paces brought him to where there were similar tunnels, or passage-ways, leading to the right and left, while just in his front were stone stairs, which he knew must lead to the rooms above.

"The spooks doubtless live down here in the dark, by day, so I'll look in these passage-ways first," he said, and he boldly turned to the right and continued his explorations.

But he had not gone very far before he stopped suddenly, as there came to his ears a low moan.

For an instant his lantern cast dancing rays, as his hand trembled, and the pistol wavered; but, conquering his alarm, he again advanced, determined not to be frightened away from his purpose.

For a few more steps he proceeded, and then again was heard the moan, and well he knew that it was not the surf without breaking upon the rocks.

"Who is there?" he called out, in tones that had not a tremor, and immediately the stone hallway was filled with fearful shrieks, enough to appall the stoutest heart.

In dismay the lantern fell from the youth's hand, and instantly he was in total darkness.

Then, as suddenly as they had begun, the shrieks ended, and a deep, sepulchral voice cried, in tones that sent a chill to the heart of the now frightened boy:

"Begone! How dare mortal footsteps pollute the haunts where lost souls dwell?"

Roland St. Leon awaited to hear no more, for again the wild shrieks were heard, and turning, he bounded away like a startled deer, dropping his pistol in his flight.

A faint glimmer of light aboard told him where to go, and soon he was out of the hideous place, and flying around the wall to where his boat lay.

Quickly he shoved it off into the water, sprung in, and headed out of the basin, while the very heavens grew black with clouds as if frowning at his daring attempt to invade the haunts of the dead.

As his little boat scudded rapidly back to the inlet near Hammersley Hall, he said, while his voice trembled slightly:

"I'll tell Flora that the stories told are all true, for spooks and spirits do dwell in the old ruin."

CHAPTER VI.

ROLAND TELLS HIS STORY.

WHEN Roland ran his boat upon the beach near his home, he was surprised, and somewhat startled to see his father standing near, apparently awaiting him.

Since the day he killed the panther in the Magnolia forest, Roland had never seen his father that far from the mansion, and was considerably surprised, for Don St. Leon had indeed lived the life of a recluse the past year,

seeing no visitors, and never appearing in his own grounds by daylight.

Something therefore of importance must have caused him to break through his rule, and Roland imagined that he knew what it was, and felt decidedly guilty, if he did not look so.

"Well, my son, have you had a pleasant sail?" asked Don St. Leon, in the kindly manner he always assumed in addressing his boy.

"I cannot say that I have, father," was the frank reply.

"Where have you been?"

It was not in the boy's nature to be deceitful or to lie, and he said, right out:

"I have been disobeying you, sir; I went to Storm Castle."

"I saw you sail away, Roland, and I have long feared that your reckless nature would urge you to go there; by so doing you have greatly displeased me, and I demand that you promise never to go there again."

"I will gladly promise, father, for I do not think there is power enough to make me take a second trip to that old ruin."

Don St. Leon looked more than surprised; his stern face grew sterner, and his brow clouded until it wore a terrible frown.

"What do you mean, sir?" he asked, hoarsely.

"I mean that I promised sweet little Flora Randolph that I would find out if spooks and spirits dwelt in the ruin, and I found out, father."

"Again I ask, sir, what do you mean, and what found you there?" and the Don seemed deeply moved, more than his son had ever seen him before.

"Well, sir, I went to the sea-basin and landed; but, being unable to get in by the ocean front, for the door resisted me, I went round to the land side and that door, in the lower wall, I succeeded in opening."

"Rash, foolish boy! Your life will yet be the forfeit of your indomitable pluck; but go on," said the Don, more deeply interested than he cared to show, and lost in admiration at his son's courage.

"I don't think I exactly deserve praise for bravery, father, as I not only showed the white feather but my heels also; but the spooks frightened me out of all nerve."

"Great God! Roland, what can you mean, and what did you see in that ruin?" asked Don St. Leon, now terribly excited.

"I entered the rear passage, as I said, sir, and coming to the place where the hallway turns off upon either side of some stone stairs, I concluded to explore the lower regions first, and I am glad that I did, as had I gone up into the rooms above I am confident I would never have gotten out alive, but become a spook like the others."

"What did you see, I ask you?"

"Nothing, sir, I only heard, and that was enough."

"I heard groans, and—"

"Nonsense! It was the wash of the sea against the outer rocks," said the Don, apparently greatly relieved.

"The sea don't shriek and talk, father, and I heard both," and Roland went on to tell the

Don all that he had heard, and how not only his lantern dropped from his hands but also his pistol, with which he intended to shoot the ghosts.

"This is a fearful story you tell, Roland, and yet I know not how to doubt you, as you are perfectly cool now, and certainly have more courage than I ever saw in a youth, and yes, have seldom known men possessed of."

"I'll swear that the ruin is full of spirits, ghosts, or spooks, call them what you may, sir, and I do not care to go there again, and so I'll tell Flora."

"No, I do not wish you to—yes, upon second thought it may be best; yes, you can tell Flora what you saw, or rather heard; it will increase the horror the people have of the place," added the Don, but in a tone that Roland did not hear.

"Now, my son, come back with me to the house, for it is going to rain, and I only came out to-day on account of my anxiety at seeing you sail off in your boat."

Together the father and son returned to the mansion, and, unable to longer delay in telling his strange adventure, Roland received his father's permission to drive over to Magnolia Villa to see Flora and Mark Randolph.

Shortly after the departure of the youth, Don St. Leon stood at the broad window of his room and gazed grimly out upon the rain, as it fell dismally upon the land and sea.

Far away in the distance dimly visible in the mist, and looking like a shadowy phantom, his eyes rested upon Storm Castle, and he muttered:

"This is a strange story the boy tells of that old ruin. I cannot doubt him, and yet, what does it mean?"

"To-night I will solve the mystery; there will be no one abroad on account of the rain, and the sea is quiet. Yes, this night will I solve the mystery of yonder old pile of rock, for surely the dead cannot live there in spirit; those tales are but the idle gossip of the neighborhood."

"Yes, to-night, to-night!"

CHAPTER VII.

A STRUGGLE WITH A GHOST.

SHORTLY after sunset Roland returned to Hammersley Hall, having left Mark and Flora in wild-eyed wonder at the story of the ruin.

As it still rained, and the youth seemed very tired, he decided to retire at an early hour, and consequently his father was left alone in the library.

But gradually the evening wore on, and the servants put out the lights and departed.

Then the Don seemed to arouse from a lethargy, and quickly commenced his preparations for the midnight trip to Storm Castle.

His face was very pale, but determined, and his nature was too thoroughly of the dare-devil kind to know what fear was.

Buckling on his belt, with sword attached, he armed himself with two pistols, and pulling on his boots, he threw around him a sea-cloak and was ready.

Already he had prepared a couple of dark-lanterns, and taking these up he departed noiselessly from the mansion.

Going down to the beach, he raised the sail of Roland's boat, sprung on board, and shoved off

from the dock, the light wind that was blowing sending him slowly along.

Once out of the inlet he headed for Storm Castle, seemingly steering by intuition, for it was exceedingly dark, and the steady-falling rain made even the outline of the coast most indistinct.

But the Don had headed correctly, for after nearly an hour's sail, the dark turrets and walls of Storm Castle came in view, dead ahead, for he was approaching by way of the land entrance.

Running in to the island he beached his boat, and taking up his lanterns, started for the water gateway.

To his surprise he found it secured, and he was confident that Roland had told him that he had not closed it behind him in his flight.

For a moment he hesitated, and seemed almost to doubt the youth's story; but then he remembered that fatal night of shipwreck, years before, and knew that he, too, had left that door unbarred when he departed, now it was fastened from within.

Looking about him he picked up the same large stone that had served him before and dashed it against the iron-studded door.

Instantly it yielded and swung open; but Don St. Leon did not enter.

Crouching down he waited, as if expecting some one to come; but only the pattering rain and wash of the surf reached his ear, and he stepped within.

Advancing noiselessly, and without his lanterns showing the way—for he knew that passageway well—he came to the stairs.

"It was in the right-hand passage that Roland said he heard the shrieks," muttered the determined man, and he turned in that direction, and after going some distance stopped and listened.

No unfamiliar sound came to his ears; only the dull sound of the waves wearing against the rocks, and once more he continued on, and finding no opposition, suddenly raised the lid of his dark-lantern, and placing it upon the floor sprung away from it.

The light streamed out in front, and showed an arched chamber of considerable size, evidently hewn out of the solid rock; but to this underground room led but one passageway, that by which he had come.

Not a soul was visible, nor an object to show that mortal being inhabited the dark and dismal chamber.

Raising his lantern and again darkening it the Don retraced his way back to the stairs, and then turned into the left passage, and slowly felt along this for a considerable distance.

He was about to place the lantern upon the stone floor, and again investigate, when suddenly upon his face was laid a cold, clammy hand.

Strong in nerve as he was, fearless to utter recklessness, Don Enrique St. Leon could not suppress a slight cry, and stretching out his arms he grasped wildly around him.

As he had hoped, his hands came in contact with a human form; but oh, how cold, how strange felt the touch, and Don St. Leon shrunk back in real terror, determined to raise the lid

of his lantern and behold what manner of being it was that confronted him.

But he was suddenly seized in powerful arms, and then began the struggle for life; but with whom did he struggle?

Don St. Leon was a man of wondrous strength and activity, and had never met his match in personal encounter, and he now strove hard to master his silent foe, who or whatever it might be.

Clutching at the throat of his antagonist, it felt cold to his touch; but he held on, and then began a desperate struggle there in that dismal dungeon beneath the Haunted Ruin.

In vain did the Don exert his great strength; he seemed in the hands of a giant, and was hurled to the rocky floor with a force that stunned him.

How long he lay there he could not tell; but at length, with an effort, he aroused himself, and with trembling hands felt around for his lanterns.

At length he found them, but they had burned out, and he must remain in darkness.

In his belt were his pistols, but in the mad struggle he had not had the power to use them; by his side hung his sword, that often had served him before; but he had been unable to draw it.

Feeling his way against the walls he retraced his steps, his brain giddy, his heart beating with abject fear, for he felt that he had met a being from another world.

Not a word, not a sound, not a breath, had come from his terrible antagonist; and the remembrance of that cold, damp form, in whose arms he had been as a child, almost unnerved him, and he longed to be once more out in the open air.

Gradually he found his way back to the entrance, and with a bound sprung out of the heavy doorway, and started rapidly for his boat.

It lay just where he had left it, and he was soon within, and heading away from the fearful island.

But one look he cast behind him, and a cry broke from his lips, for there, upon the turret, stood a tall form clad in white!

A moment after the weird figure waved a weird light in the air, and then both disappeared.

On, on sped the little boat, but it seemed to stand still to the man who held its helm, and bitterly he cursed the winds for not blowing a gale to send him flying on his course.

At length he ran into the inlet, lowered the sail, and seizing his lantern and belt of arms, bounded toward the mansion.

Just as he crossed his threshold, unseen by any one, the eastern skies lightened up with the approach of day, and he knew that he must have lain for hours in that rock-bound chamber.

Shuddering, he turned up the lights in his room and glanced at himself in the glass.

With a wail, rather than a cry of horror, he started back at what he beheld there, for his face was deathlike in hue, his eyes were sunken, deep lines were across his face, and, strangest of all, his hair had turned snow-white.

With a groan he tottered to his feet, and there

hours after Roland found him, when he went to call him to breakfast.

One glance at the wet cloak, the mud-stained boots, the lantern and belt of arms, and the son knew where his father had been; one look into that haggard face and white hair, and he knew that his father had passed a night of horror.

But seeing Roland, the Don at once rallied, and although, by his son's face, he knew that he knew where he had been, he made no comment, and between those two no word of the Haunted Ruin was again spoken, and the dread island remained as the abode of a demon, and a mystery that could never be solved.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MIDSHIPMAN.

"THIS looks like a nasty coast to be caught on in a storm, sir, if one don't know where the harbors and reefs are."

"It is a dangerous coast, skipper; but I know every channel and rock for miles," answered the person addressed, and who was a tall, handsome youth of nineteen, clad in the uniform of an American midshipman.

The one to whom he replied was a weather-beaten man of fifty years, and the two stood upon the deck of a small lugger that, under easy sail, was heading in toward the picturesque coast of Florida.

Forward there were three or four seamen, idly gazing at the shores they were nearing.

"And what may that be, sir?" asked the skipper, addressing the midshipman, and at the same time pointing to a huge pile of rocks in the distance.

"That is known along the coast as the Storm Castle, and some call it the Haunted Ruin; you cannot often cruise along these shores if you do not know yonder island."

"No, sir, my coasting trade is most round Pensacola, as I told you, when you engaged me to run you down here; but I've heard of that ruin, and who has not?"

"Boys!" and he called to his crew.

"Ay, ay, skipper," and the four men came aft.

"Yonder is the Haunted Ruin you have all heard about."

Instantly the men gazed in superstitious dread at the massive structure, and it was evident that they had all heard of Storm Castle.

"And you live near there, sir?" asked the skipper.

"Yes," answered the midshipman. "My home is yonder in that orange-grove. How natural it all looks to me, though it has been nearly four years since I went to enter the navy," and the young man seemed lost in thought, as memories of the olden time crowded upon him.

But the skipper had no idea of losing a feast of superstitious stories, and, as he gazed upon the ruin, remarked:

"They tell strange stories about the old ruin, and I've seen sailors who say that they've run by this coast at night and many are the sights they've looked at."

"Storm Castle certainly has a very unenviable reputation; but the stories regarding it are greatly exaggerated, though I must confess

that I have a holy horror of the place, and have seen strange sights there myself; port your helm, skipper, for yonder is the channel to the inlet—there, steady as you are," and the young officer gave directions how to steer until the lugger was heading into the harborage near Hammersley Hall.

The skipper mended his helm, yet at the same time kept his weather eye upon Storm Castle, as did also his crew.

Under the pilotage of the midshipman the lugger moved slowly in and ran alongside the small dock, where a number of slaves, who had been surprised at the sight of a strange vessel coming into the inlet, had come down to see what it meant.

"It's Massa Rulland!" cried one, as the midshipman sprung ashore, and instant yells of delight broke from the sable lips.

"Well, Tom, Pedro, Caesar, how are you all?" and he grasped the brawny hands, well knowing that the welcome extended to him was an honest one.

"All well, sah, an' yerself has growed to be a mighty man! Golly, Massa Rullund, you is painful good-lookin', an' ther leddies will break their bressed hearts fer yer."

"Tom, you always were a flatterer; but, tell me, how is my father?"

"Jist ther same, sah, 'ceptin' he's let his mustache grow, an' it's as white as his ha'r; an' Missy Flora, Massa Rullund, don't yer want ter know 'bout her?" slyly added the old negro.

"And how is she, Tom, and her brother, Mark?"

"Massa Mark am gone away, sah, of late; he am goin' ter be a navy essifer, sich as you is, sah; but Missy Flo' she am more like a angel dan eber she was, an' I'se bin awful 'feered der good Lord w'd want her up in hebbin ter play der golden harp fer Him, sah."

"Well, Tom, I must run on to the house, so look after the comfort of the skipper and his crew, and tell them all about the Storm Castle."

"Massa Rullund, I'll do all yer tells me, sah, fer de comfit o' der gemmans, but dis ole nigger don't do no talkin' 'bout that thar ole pile o' rocks, 'kase it's right thar that ther Devil, hisself, do live."

But Roland St. Leon, who, four years before had left his home to become a midshipman in the navy, his father having obtained for him a warrant, walked briskly on toward the mansion, which, imbedded in honeysuckle, and surrounded by beautiful foliage and innumerable flowers, seemed more beautiful than ever.

After a brisk walk he reached the grounds surrounding the mansion, and as he sprung upon the broad piazza his hand was grasped by his father, who said, in a voice that trembled:

"Welcome home, my brave, my noble boy."

One look into that haggard, careworn face, and it touched the heart of Roland, for he little dreamed that four years could make such a change; he had grown old while yet in the very prime of life.

Seating themselves in easy-chairs, in full view of the beautiful grounds and the sea beyond, the father and son talked long and earnestly together, and the young midshipman learned of the death of his mother's father, who, after the

marriage of his daughter, had gone to the city to dwell.

"Of course you inherit the Hall, Roland; but crops have been poor of late years, and it may be that I have not looked after things as I should, so the place is in debt sadly; but, perhaps all will yet come well; ay, and it shall come right, for I'll yet nerve my coward heart to the task before me, the duty that devolves upon me."

Don St. Leon seemed wandering in his mind, and to change the subject, Roland said:

"I suppose you have not seen any of the people from Magnolia Villa? Remember, I have not heard from home for more than a year, father."

"True: yes, I have seen one of the people from Magnolia."

"Indeed! Colonel Randolph?"

"No, but his angel daughter."

"Flora?" cried Roland, in surprise.

"Yes; I lay sick for some days, and daily that sweet girl came over to see how I was, and one day I heard voices at the door, and when I learned who it was, a strange impulse caused me to send for her."

"She came in, and from that day she has visited here regularly, though her father knew not of her coming: Roland, Flora Randolph is a beautiful girl."

"I am glad to hear you praise her thus, father, for I candidly confess I love her dearly."

But Roland stopped suddenly as he saw his father's face, and beheld him spring to his feet with a bitter imprecation in Spanish.

Surprised, pained, he knew not why, he said, calmly:

"Why, father; tell me, what have I said to anger you?"

With a great effort the Don controlled himself, and said, abruptly:

"You have not angered me; I am getting old and nervous; now, tell me, how long you have to remain at home?"

"Only a day or two, father; our vessel touched at Pensacola for repairs, and knowing that I lived somewhere on the coast not very far distant, the captain gave me leave to run home, so I chartered a lugger, and here I am; but, in a year's time, I will have a long leave given, and how glad will I be to spend it at home."

It was late before the father and son retired to their rooms, but at an early hour the following morning Roland was up, and ordering his saddle horse, he dashed away in the direction of Magnolia Villa, distant three miles from Hammersley Hall.

Out in the garden, with a little negress following with her arms full of flowers, Flora Randolph was clipping beautiful roses and exotics with which to ornament the breakfast table; but, at the sound of hoof-strokes rapidly approaching she looked up, and with a cry of joy bounded to meet the horseman, for at a glance she recognized him, in spite of the four years that had passed since she had last seen her boy hero.

And greatly changed was Flora in those years, for, from a little girl, she now stood on the threshold of womanhood, and was budding into perfection in form, and exquisite beauty in face,

But with the abandon of a child she met Roland, and hand in hand the two ascended to the piazza, where Colonel Randolph warmly greeted the young midshipman, who, since the day he saved the lives of his children, had loved him as his own son.

And, young as she was, Roland loved Flora with all his heart, while she fairly idolized him, and from "sweethearts" in years ago, they at once became lovers, and the youth frankly asked Colonel Randolph, that he might return to his ship feeling that the maiden was his promised wife.

The colonel called them silly children, and laughed at them, as Flora was not yet fifteen, and Roland only in his twentieth year; but seeing that they really were in earnest, the father gave his consent, and said:

"I have to ride up to town to-day, Roland, for a day or two; but upon my return I will go and have a talk with your father upon the subject, for surely he will not refuse to see me, knowing my errand."

Roland promised to prepare the way, and soon after bade Flora and her father farewell and returned to the hall.

The following day he set sail, and his father went down to the beach with him to bid him a last good-by.

"Now, father, do not refuse to see the colonel, for my life's happiness depends upon it. With, in a year I will be again at home. Farewell, sir."

Wringing his father's hand and springing on board the lugger, Roland St. Leon bade farewell to his boyhood's home, a great joy at his heart, in spite of his sorrow at parting.

Alas! had he but known what the future would bring forth!

CHAPTER IX.

AT LAST.

TRUE to his word, Colonel Randolph called at Hammersley Hall a few days after the departure of Roland, and to his request that he might see Don St. Leon, the negro major-domo replied that his master could see no one.

"But say to him that I would not intrude were the matter not one of importance, and of deep moment to both him and myself," said Colonel Randolph, considerably cut by the strange and unaccountable conduct of the father of Roland.

The negro soon returned, and said, with the utmost politeness:

"I am sorry, sah, but Don St. Leon declines to see you."

With a muttered curse Colonel Randolph turned on his heel and left the mansion, and upon his arriving at Magnolia Villa, he said to Flora, who saw that her father was angry:

"Don St. Leon is either a fool or a madman. Out of charity, I will believe that he is a maniac, and that he is never therefore seen by any one; but if such is the case Roland should have told me."

Flora knew that the Don was not a madman, and yet she kept silent, for she had never told her father of having seen that lonely, white haired man, who grew more embittered with life each day that he lived.

The next day Flora rode over to Hammersley Hall, and the tears came to her eyes as she too was refused an audience with the mysterious man, and she returned to her home with a sad heart.

One day when Colonel Randolph was out on horseback alone, he galloped along the smooth white beach, and before he was aware, found himself in a cedar grove which he knew to belong to Hammersley Hall.

Drawing rein he was about to retrace his way when his horse shied violently, and there, seated beneath the shadow of a dense cedar, was none other than the mysterious master of Hammersley Hall.

"Pardon me, sir."

Then Colonel Randolph gazed into the eyes of the man before him, as did he in his, and in spite of the haggard face and white hair, he appeared to recognize him.

"Heaven, I thank Thee! Henry Leon, at last we meet, you and I?"

The voice of Colonel Randolph trembled with suppressed emotion, and springing from his saddle he stood face to face with the man who had so shunned him.

"Yes, Merton Randolph, we meet at last," was the low reply of the Don.

"And the meeting I hail with joy untold, for now it shall be your life or mine," fairly hissed Colonel Randolph, his sad eyes now blazing with fury, as he stepped toward the Don with threatening attitude.

"Yes, your life or mine; but not now, not here, Merton Randolph."

"Now and here."

"And I say no! I am not ready to die—hold! I do not mean that I fear death, as you should know; but there are preparations that I must make ere I meet you in deadly combat, for I know your prowess well."

"And you look old and feeble; but were you twice the age you are, and twice as feeble, I would meet you."

"My strength has not left me, even though my hair be white and my face haggard."

"I shunned you, Merton Randolph, because seeing you the day you came to my home with my boy—"

"Oh, God! it was *your* boy, Henry Leon, that saved the lives of my children," groaned the colonel, moved most deeply.

"Yes, my son saved your children from death; that day I recognized you as you drove up, and now you know why I retired from the world, why I persistently refused to see you; but Fate has so willed it that at last we meet."

"Yes, and Fate will so will it that one of us must die by the hand of the other."

"Oh! that I could say to you let our paths here divide through life, after that one noble act of your son's! But, no; it *must* be, for your blood and mine must not commingle in the veins of a living being, and toward that end it now tends, as I called upon you after Roland's departure to tell you that I had given my consent for your son and my daughter to marry."

"Great God! such a sacrilege can never be, Henry Leon."

"Never!" was the stern response of Enrique St. Leon, or Henry Leon, as the colonel called him.

"Then to ward off that fearful consummation you and I must meet in deadly combat, and one must be slain; then the child of the dead will never wed the child of the father's slayer."

"True; we must meet, and one of us must die. In three days, at sunset, I will be in this grove."

"We will need no seconds, so come only accompanied by a faithful negro, as I will come."

"On my table at home I will leave a statement that on seeing you I recognized one against whom I had an old feud to settle, and that we met in the duello; you can leave a like statement, so that the world may know we met in fair combat."

"What weapons will you meet me with?"

The Don had spoken in the most cool and matter-of-fact tones, and Colonel Randolph replied, with equal coolness:

"In spite of your assertion that your strength still remains, I doubt you, and I will take no advantage, and the pistol will place us upon equal terms."

"Pistols then be the weapons; the third day from this meet me here; good-afternoon, Senor Colonel," and Don St. Leon raised his Panama hat with mock politeness.

"I will be here; *adios*, Senor Enrique St. Leon," returned Colonel Randolph, in the same cutting tones as the other had spoken, and springing into his saddle he dashed rapidly away, leaving his enemy gazing after him, a strange, grim smile upon his face.

"At last! at last! a short while more and the end must come."

So saying Don St. Leon turned and walked slowly back toward the mansion; but on the way he paused in the orange grove, and bent above the violet-covered mound of the young wife, with grief as poignant as that he felt when he laid the dead form in its grave nineteen long years before.

CHAPTER X.

THE DUEL IN THE CEDARS.

TRUE to time, when the sun was nearing the western horizon, Don St. Leon and Colonel Merton Randolph entered the cedar grove.

The former came on foot, accompanied only by his butler, a venerable negro who had been the factotum of the Hammersleys for two generations.

Colonel Randolph rode to the rendezvous on horseback, and behind him came his negro coachman, bearing a box in his arms.

Until they arrived in the grove the two negroes did not seem to realize the cause of their masters coming there; but when Colonel Randolph bowed coldly to Don St. Leon's salute, they then knew that a hostile meeting was intended, and they wished heartily that they had not been honored by being called on to witness a duel, of which they seemed to have a holy horror.

"I have brought my pistols, sir; you know them well, and perhaps might be willing to use one," said Colonel Randolph, coldly.

"Thank you: having given me luck before they will be most acceptable: we can each load our own weapons," and Don St. Leon took one

of the long dueling pistols from the mahogany box in the hands of the colonel's coachman.

"That is the one you used before, sir; I will take this one, which has not been *lucky*, as you term it," and Colonel Randolph took up one of the weapons and handed it to the Don, while he took the other.

Both then loaded their pistols with the utmost coolness, not the tremor of a muscle shaking the hand of either.

"What say you to ten paces, sir; is that too near?" asked the Don.

"The nearer the better, sir."

"Well, and the word to fire?"

"Suppose we stand back to back, step off at the word *one*, and counting aloud together, wheel at the word *five* and fire?"

"A suggestion I readily fall in with, my dear colonel, as we have no seconds: here, Toby!"

"Yes, master," and the old negro butler tremblingly approached.

"If I am killed, go to the house and send after my body; if I am seriously wounded, send for Dr. Winston."

"Yes, sir."

"In either case my written letters of instruction you will find in my desk; give them to the doctor."

"I will, sir; but I do hope you won't come to harm," said the faithful old Toby, for Don St. Leon, though austere in manner, was ever a kind master to his servants, all of whom liked him greatly.

"Life is uncertain, Toby, and death overtakes us all some day," said the Don in answer to Toby's last remark and a grim smile hovered a moment upon his lips.

"And the young master, sir?" asked the old negro.

"I have made my will, and left a letter for my son in my desk; see that he gets it," and as the word *son*, was upon his tongue, his voice quivered slightly for the first time; but that dark, stern face showed no sign of emotion.

"Master, I don't want to unnerve you, sah, but there seems to be a cloud on my heart; good-by, sah," and Toby grasped the Don's hand.

"There's been a cloud on my heart, Toby, for many, many long years; perhaps it will drift away now," answered Don St. Leon, sadly, and wringing the hand of the faithful slave, he turned away and let his gaze fall upon Storm Castle.

In the meantime, Colonel Randolph's sad face was lighted up by the fierce glow in his eyes, and he watched every motion of the Don, listened to every word, as though he feared he might lose his revenge, and bitter, fearful longing had he for revenge against the man he had come there to meet.

"I am ready, sir," at length he broke in, somewhat impatiently, and yet Don St. Leon did not move; he seemed lost in thought, dreaming of the past, as his eyes gazed upon the Haunted Ruin.

"I am ready, Don St. Leon," again said Colonel Randolph; but still the absorbed man never moved.

"Great God! does he dread to put his sin-blackened life against mine?" cried the colonel,

in savage tones, and, hurt at the remark against his master, old Toby stepped forward and touched him on the arm, saying quietly:

"Colonel Randolph is waiting, sah."

The Don started visibly, looked around, and then, as his dark face flushed, said quietly:

"Pardon me, I had forgotten why I was here; I was dreaming; I am also ready, my dear colonel," and the sneer came back to the lip again, and the fire to the eyes, for in the remembrance of the year of his wedded life passed in Storm Castle, all the sternness had gone momentarily out of the face of Enrique St. Leon.

As the Don stepped to his position, Colonel Randolph glanced into his eyes, and the stare was returned, and both read in the other's face that neither held one atom of fear in the heart.

Back to back they then took their stands and the coachman of Magnolia Villa, shrinking from the sight, stepped hastily aside to hold his own and his master's horse; but old Toby stood where his eyes could rest upon the face of the Don, and he said, fervently:

"God bless you, master, for old Toby's sake!"

That same grim smile, so unfathomable, gleamed an instant on the stern face, and then the two voices said in chorus:

"Ready! Forward! one! two! three! four! *five!*"

With the latter word both men wheeled as though on a pivot, and both pistols flashed, but one was held straight upward and fired in the air!

CHAPTER XI.

A GRAVE BETWEEN THEM.

As the echo of the two weapons died away, one of the duelists tottered backward and would have fallen had he not been caught in arms outstretched to receive him; then he sunk gently down, and from a wound in his breast the red current of life burst forth in a torrent.

"Great God! I have killed him, and he never fired upon me! Henry Leon, you are revenged even in your last act, for you have made me your murderer."

In an agony of despair Colonel Randolph dropped down beside the man who he felt was dying, and looked earnestly into his face.

The eyes met his, and again came that grim smile, while the dying man said, in low tones:

"Merton Randolph, you are avenged; and so am I, for I fired in the air."

"Ay, cruelly are you avenged, for I would rather be where you are now, than feel what I do at having fired upon a man who turned not his pistol upon me.

"Oh, God! have I not had bitterness enough in my life, that I am forced to drink to the dregs this cup of gall?"

Enrique St. Leon heard his words, wearily opened his eyes, and sunk back in the arms of old Toby, a dead man.

"Master colonel, he is dead, sah."

It was old Toby's plaintive voice, and it seemed to cut the proud man to the heart, for he cried, bitterly:

"Alas! yes, he is dead, and though unresisting himself, he died by my hand; ha!" and he sprung

to his feet as the rapid clatter of hoofs reached his ears, and then a horse and rider dashed in sight.

With livid face and chattering teeth he gazed on that rider, for it was his daughter!

Riding up to the spot, white and with wild eyes, the young girl threw herself from her saddle, and then started back with a cry of horror, as her glance fell upon the tall recumbent form and white hair of Don St. Leon.

"Great God! Flora, why did you come here?" groaned her unhappy father.

"Dead! is Don St. Leon dead?" she gasped, unheeding the question of Colonel Randolph.

"Yes, missy, he is dead," was the sad response of old Toby, while with bowed head her father stood near, his whole form quivering with emotion.

"Dead! Don Enrique St. Leon dead, and by the hand of my father?"

"Flora! Flora! why did you come to this fatal spot?" groaned Colonel Randolph.

"To save you I came, father, for Black Sue told me she feared you were going to fight a duel, for she had seen you cleaning your pistols, and heard you talking aloud; but oh! what had that poor man done to anger you?"

"Flora, you know not what I have suffered in the past at his hands, or you would not condemn me for wishing him dead; but I meant not to murder him, for, Flora, he received my fire and fatally, while he fired in the air."

And again the proud head was lowered with sorrow, while, kneeling by the side of the dead, still held in the arms of old Toby, Flora murmured:

"Poor old man! He was Roland's father, and what will he say—what will he do, when he knows by whose hand he has fallen?"

"Oh! father—father! you have embittered my whole life!"

Colonel Randolph started and turned toward his daughter, and in a tone that severely rebuked her, said:

"Flora, I am going home; this is no place for you, but if you grieve more for the dead than for the living, remain."

"Forgive me, father; I meant not to lacerate a heart already deeply wounded. Come, sir, I am ready to accompany you."

Telling his coachman to remain and aid Toby with the body, Colonel Randolph raised his daughter to her saddle, and mounting his own horse, the two rode slowly away from that fatal spot.

Arriving at Magnolia Villa Colonel Randolph sought his own room, and there, hour after hour, Flora heard him pacing the floor, and her own great grief was forgotten in a desire to comfort her father in his suffering.

Noiselessly she approached his door, and receiving no answer to her knock, she entered the room, for the door was unlocked.

No light was in the apartment, except what came from the flood of silver moonlight pouring in through the open windows; and pacing with monotonous tread to and fro, she discovered her father, his head drooping upon his breast, his hands clasped behind him.

"Father, I have come to seek you. Come, sit down and talk to me," she said, softly, and

taking his unresisting hand she led him to a sofa near the window.

As she caught sight of his haggard face she started, for never had she seen him look so strangely sad and unhappy before.

"Flora!" and he turned his dark eyes full upon her.

"Flora, to-day I killed a man whose life I have sought for many long years, and now I grieve that I did so, and this moment would exchange places with him were it in my power.

"Mind you, I do not regret that I sought revenge upon him; oh, no! but when I feel that he stood up before me and made me his deliberate murderer, it cuts me to the heart.

"You are but a child in years, Flora, but you are a woman in understanding, and I will tell you why it was that I sought the life of the man whom I this day shot down."

Then, in a low, earnest tone, Colonel Randolph turned back the pages of his life, and with startled attention Flora listened to every word, until the tones of her father died away, and his story had ended.

With a wall that came from her inmost soul, she cried:

"Father, I am a child in years, but a woman in love, and the breaking of my idolatrous dream will break my poor heart.

"No, no, never can I become the wife of Roland St. Leon; the open grave yawns between us, and though not of his digging, or mine, our hands must never be joined above the dead. Father, my poor heart is broken!"

With a plaintive moan she sunk upon the floor, and hastily her father rung for help, as the poor girl had fainted away.

CHAPTER XII.

THE RETURN.

It was a beautiful starlight night, half a year after the fatal duel between Don St. Leon and Colonel Merton Randolph, that a small sloop-of-war was standing swiftly in-shore under the pressure of an eight-knot breeze, and heading almost directly for Storm Castle.

Upon the quarter-deck stood half a score of officers in uniform, chatting pleasantly and smoking fragrant cigars, while amidships and forward the crew were grouped about telling yarns, or listlessly looking out upon the white-crested waters.

"Well, St. Leon, I wish you much joy in your return home, and only wish I was in your place," said a young lieutenant, addressing a passed midshipman who stood at his side, and in whose handsome, fearless face the reader cannot fail to recognize the hero of this romance.

"You have a three months' leave, have you not, Roland?" chimed in another young officer.

"Yes, Nixon; but I fear it will hardly seem like three weeks to me."

"Don't forget to join us at Mobile, St. Leon, three months from to-day," said a senior lieutenant, approaching the group.

"I will be there promptly, Mr. Richmond," answered Roland St. Leon.

"I know you will, St. Leon," said another person, approaching, and who wore the rank of captain; "but," he added in a low tone, "I am particularly anxious that you should be on

time; as I know that a schooner-of-war is to be commissioned there, and my idea is that you are to be made a lieutenant, for your services have certainly deserved promotion, even if you are a boy in years; but, how much further can we stand in here, for I do not wish to run in too shallow water?"

"No danger, Captain Mayo, for there is plenty of depth here; but, after you pass yonder island, if you will luff up, I will take a boat ashore."

"And that is your father's old home, you say, but, since your babyhood, allowed to go to decay?" asked the captain, leveling his glass upon Storm Castle, now not more than half a league distant.

"Yes, sir; it is now crumbling to decay, and no one has dwelt there in twenty years."

"You are mistaken, my boy, for I distinctly see the form of a man upon the turret."

"Your glass, sir, please," and Roland leveled it upon the tower.

After a long look he said, half-playfully and half in earnest:

"I forgot to say, captain, that no one has dwelt there in that time excepting *spooks and spirits!*"

"Nonsense! I have heard the old pile of rocks spoken of before as being haunted, and the dwelling-place of departed spirits; it is frequently the subject of conversation in Pensacola, yet I am not so superstitious, although a seaman, to believe in anything so foolish."

"I hope I have also outgrown the superstition of my boyhood, captain; but I once believed firmly that ghosts dwelt in yonder old ruin, for I had proof of their presence, and the mystery is yet unsolved; but here we are, sir, in good water to lay to," and while orders were given to bring the vessel to and lower away a boat, Roland bade his brother officers good-by, several of them expressing their determination to see him ashore.

With many kind wishes, and a hearty cheer from the men, the gallant young midshipman sprung into the boat alongside, the oarsmen bent to their work, and the cutter moved rapidly shoreward.

As they rowed near the end of the island, Roland St. Leon glanced up at the turret, and there plainly visible was the form that the captain had pointed out, slowly pacing to and fro.

A shudder crept over the young officer in spite of himself, and notwithstanding the gay conversation of his comrades, the chill presentiment of coming evil yet remained at his heart.

"Way 'nough, lads! now, my friends, thanking you for your kind escort to *terra firma*, I leave you," and Roland sprung to his feet as the boat grated upon the beach.

A warm hand-clasp from his brother officers, a salute from the cutter's crew, with a "God speed yer honor, sir," from the coxswain and Roland St. Leon sprung on shore, his traps being placed beside him.

Then the boat set off on its return to the ship, leaving the young midshipman gazing wistfully after it until he saw it reach the vessel's side.

The boatswain's whistle then came to his ears, the creaking of yards followed, the flapping of sails, and then the beautiful sloop-of-war bent gracefully to the breeze, and stood away once more for deep water.

Until her white wings of canvas faded from view, Roland St. Leon stood watching her, and then his gaze fell almost unconsciously upon Storm Castle.

There, still upon the turret, pacing to and fro was that silent form, boldly relieved against the starlit sky, and again a shudder crept over the youth, and the same chill hand of presentiment grasped at his heart.

"Great God! can yonder ghostly form be my evil genius?" he exclaimed with considerable feeling, and then, half angry with himself for being so deeply impressed at the sight of a phantom that had harmlessly haunted him since his boyhood, he threw his traps across his shoulder and set off for a walk to Hammersley Hall.

Could he but have known what there awaited him, gladly would he have turned his back forever upon that home amid orange bowers.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DEATH-KNELL IN THE HEART.

WHEN Roland St. Leon drew near to the mansion, which arose so dark and gloomy before him, he knew that it was late and did not anticipate seeing the place lighted up; but there was one room in which he knew there was a lamp kept burning all night, and he went around to that wing, which had been the special abode of his father.

"The place is not kept in the old-time order," he muttered, as even in the darkness he could see that the paths were overgrown with weeds.

As he turned the corner he halted suddenly, and once more that chill came over his heart, for the windows of his father's library and bed-chamber were as dark as the rest of the house.

With a dread that was now increasing each moment, he sprung upon the piazza and gave a loud knock.

Like a statue he stood while he awaited some response to his summons; but none came, and going around to the back piazza he again knocked loudly.

"In God's name what has happened?" he cried aloud, and once more his blows fell heavily upon the door, yet still there came no response.

"Hello there! who is that?"

The voice came from the cabin of old Toby, a hundred feet away.

Quickly Roland bounded in that direction, and the next moment confronted the old negro, lamp in hand, standing half-dressed in his door, while over his shoulder peeped Hannah, his wife, and the cook at the Hall.

"Oh, Lordy! it is master Roland!" exclaimed the old negro.

"Yes, Toby, and tell me, for Heaven's sake, what has happened?" cried Roland, now thoroughly alarmed.

"Come into the old man's cabin, master Roland; Hannah, ole woman, get the easy-chair Missy Edna gave you more 'an twenty years ago," said Toby, sadly, and he led Roland to a seat.

Sinking into the chair, while Hannah was dusting it out from habit, the young man cried:

"Now tell me all, Toby, tell me of my father."

"He is dead, Master Roland."

"I feared it; I have felt that some dread evil was upon me," and with his elbows upon his knees, he sat for long, long minutes, the old negroes refraining from speaking to him in the deep grief that was upon him.

At length he raised his white face, for his suffering was great, as he loved his father with a devotion that was almost idolatrous.

"Toby, when did he die?"

"Six months ago, come Friday, sah."

"I hope his illness was not a lingering one and severe?"

"It was not sick long that he was, sah, but it was awful severe," procrastinated the old negro, not knowing how to tell the true story of the Don's death.

"My poor, poor father! would that I could have been here to have soothed his dying hours; was no one with him, Toby, when he died? I mean none of the neighbors?"

"I tell yer, ole man, this beatin' round ther bush hain't helpin' matters, so yer better tell ther truf," put in Hannah, in a loud whisper to her husband, and encouraged by his wife, old Toby broke out with:

"Master Roland, your poor father was killed!"

"Killed!" and the youth was upon his feet, his eyes fairly blazing.

"Yes, sah, he was killed in a duel."

"In a duel? Then by my hand shall his slayer die!"

The burning eyes, the set lips, showed that Roland St. Leon was in fearful earnest, for family feuds in those days were kept up with the greatest bitterness, and the result would be a vendetta that would run through several generations.

Having given vent to his terrible threat, Roland paced to and fro, each moment becoming more calm, while old Hannah whispered to her liege lord:

"Now yer've done it; trouble's brewin' in these parts; but I puts my trust in Provydunce."

"Provydunce ain't going to foolin' with duels, ole woman; wrong man generally gets the bullet in his heart," was the philosophical reply of old Toby, and he turned again toward his young master, seemingly anticipating the next question.

At length it came, and the voice was strangely calm:

"Toby, who was it that killed my father?"

"Colonel Randolph, sah."

Again was Roland St. Leon upon his feet; but only for one instant, for, almost crushed by the startling news he heard, he sunk back into the chair again.

"Quick, ole woman, the young master is going to faint," cried Toby, in great alarm.

"No, I am better now; it was but a momentary weakness. So Colonel Randolph killed my father in a duel?"

It was asked in an almost indifferent tone, and so calm and yet grimlike that the youth

seemed then the very counterpart of his father, and old Hannah remarked, *sotto voce*:

"That chile am the image of his father this blessid minute."

"Yes, sah; the colonel shot him through the heart."

"Tell me all about it, Toby; tell me each and every circumstance connected with this most remarkable duel."

There was the utmost calmness in the tone, and excepting for its paleness, the handsome face was expressionless; no, there was a brightness in the eyes and a peculiar smile upon the lip, but the brightness was such as the vivid lightning is, when descending from the black thunder-cloud.

In a few words Toby went on to tell of the visit of Colonel Randolph and the direct refusal of his father to see him, and then the circumstances attending the duel, adding the information that Black Sue of Magnolia Villa had heard from Flora Randolph, her young mistress, that her father had told her he had come upon the Don in the cedar grove accidentally, and recognizing in him an old and bitter enemy, had challenged him to meet him.

The grief of the colonel at the refusal of the Don to fire upon him, Toby also made known, and the coming of Flora to the fatal spot, yet too late to prevent evil.

Roland, from beginning to end, never uttered a word; but when Toby had finished his story and ceased speaking, he said:

"And my father fired in the air, you say?"

"Yes, sah; you know he was a dead shot, Master Roland, and could throw bullets wherever he wanted them; but it 'peared as tho' he didn't want to kill the colonel."

"There is some mystery about this, which I will yet solve. You say that my father left me a personal letter?"

"Yes, sah; it is in his desk and I have the key here. The lawyer, Judge Burton, also left you a copy of the will, and told me to ask you to ride up to town and see him when you came home."

"Well, get a lamp and I will go over to the house; you need not arrange my bed, Hannah, as I will throw myself on the lounge when I need rest," and followed by Toby, with the lamp, Roland went over to the mansion.

A damp, dusty smell greeted him as the door was opened; but Toby hastily threw up the windows, and lighting the large lamp in the Don's room, tried to make things look as comfortable as possible.

"Now, give me the desk key, Toby, and then I'll not need you any more, so return to your cabin," said Roland, in a tired kind of way.

The old negro obeyed silently, and telling his young master that Hannah would have a nice breakfast for him at nine o'clock, he left him alone in his sorrow, shaking his head ominously as he went out, and muttering to himself:

"The end o' this thing hain't come yet; there's trouble coming, 'cause I feels it in my heart."

CHAPTER XIV.

A LETTER FROM THE DEAD.

FOR some moments after Toby left him alone in the gloomy mansion, Roland paced the room

in an endeavor to find courage to turn and unlock his father's desk, the key to which he clutched nervously in his hand.

At length he turned, and approaching the handsome piece of furniture, placed the key in the lock and opened it.

The first object that caught his eye, was a large, sealed package, addressed in his father's well-known hand to him.

Beneath this was a paper marked in Judge Burton's writing:

"A copy of Don Enrique St. Leon's will."

Taking up the package, Roland sat down by the desk and broke the seal, discovering several closely written pages.

They were headed simply, "My Confession," and nerving himself to the task before him, Roland read as follows:

"MY SON:—From the grave my words come to you, so heed them well, for not to priest or church do I make this confession of my life, but to you, you who are the son of the only woman I ever loved, you who saved me from a suicide's grave when you were but a few days old, and you who have been the idol of my heart, since twenty long years ago I brought you here to live.

"To begin, I will say that I am not a Spaniard, as has been believed by all, though my mother was a Spanish noble lady—the Donna Inez Aldama of Madrid—my father an English gentleman, who married her while traveling in Spain.

"My father's name was Henry Leon, and I was named after him, but in after years turned it into the Spanish, calling myself Don Enrique St. Leon.

"If I have been sinful in life, I owe it to my early training, for my father was killed in a duel by an English officer, when I was in my tenth year, and from that day my mother trained me up with a spirit of revenge in my heart against the man who had taken my father's life, and I was schooled with sword and pistol daily, that, when I arrived at the age of eighteen I might call out the one who had made my mother a widow, and me fatherless.

"Entering the English navy as a midshipman when thirteen years of age, it so happened that I was sent on an extended cruise just before my eighteenth year, and when I returned, at the age of twenty-one, death had been before me, and my father's slayer had died a natural death.

"Disappointed in her revenge with him, my mother urged that it should not end there, and obtained a promise from me that I would hold his son responsible for the father's deed.

"In vain I tried to show to her that in the duel my father had really been in the wrong; she would not listen to me, for she seemed to love revenge as dearly as she loved my father.

"You can imagine, my son, the influence of such a training, and if it made me a stern and embittered man, while almost a boy in years, it is not to be wondered at.

"One day, when our ship was in port, a young brother officer came to me in great distress, and in confidence told me that he had secretly married a beautiful maiden of a most respectable family, but being a nobleman himself, and heir to high rank, his father had arranged a match for him with a titled lady of vast wealth.

"Morally a coward, he had not the courage to come out and acknowledge his marriage, and his young wife having weakly sworn to him that she would never do so without his consent, my friend declared that rather than face the anger of his parents, and lose a fortune he would inherit from a bachelor uncle only on condition that he married to suit his father, he would get a divorce from his wife and wed to suit those from whom he would receive so much.

"I urged against his cruel treatment of his wife, especially as before long she would become a mother; but he would not listen to me, and set about his arrangements for sending her away.

"Receiving unexpected orders, on the eve of his departure for Spain with his unsuspecting wife, he came to me and begged that I would accompany her to her destination, and under the spur of the moment I accepted the charge, while he was ordered to American waters in his vessel for a year's cruise.

"With the young wife under my charge I departed, and then, to my surprise, found that she had gone off without the consent of her parents, or their knowledge, and I felt that trouble would follow.

"And it did, for we were tracked to the place in Spain where I carried her, a country village, and there I was confronted by her brother and accused of dragging his sister down to ruin.

"To my horror I found that brother to be the son of the man who had killed my father, and he believed that I had acted in a spirit of revenge.

"I could not betray my friend, and I left it for the young wife to speak; but she sealed her lips against breaking her oath to her husband, though she protested that I was not guilty.

"This the enraged brother would not believe, and believing me a base wretch he challenged me to meet him.

"I refused, knowing my innocence of wrongdoing; but as the news had gone abroad, my mother, to whom I had written, came to the village, and knowing who my accuser was, demanded that I should meet him.

"I accepted, if he would wait until I could get letters proving that I was guiltless; but he would not, and seeing that I would not be drawn into a duel, thus seriously complicating things, as I stood there in a bad light with the world believing I had taken a mean revenge upon a young girl, because her father had slain mine; my mother deliberately stated that she knew me to be guilty, for I had told her so.

"Shocked at her savage desire for revenge, I could not deny her words, thereby causing the public to believe her so false, and I accepted the challenge and, *killed the brother*.

"But here it did not end, for the young wife in her grief took her own life, and still left no statement proving me guiltless.

"Nor here did it end, for, upon my return to England the second brother challenged me, and having taken the false step, I was compelled to keep it up, and we met in a duel, fighting with the same pistols with which our fathers had fought, and which his brother and myself had used.

"Seriously wounded he fell, and it was believed that he would die, and public censure fell heavily upon me, as, to seek revenge I had destroyed a woman's honor, then slain her brother, and as it was said, mortally wounded the other one.

"Nor was the suicide of the young wife forgotten, but laid as another death at my hands, while it was vividly remembered against me that my father had been in the wrong in the duel he had fought.

"The result of all this was, Roland, that I was court-martialed and sent from the navy in disgrace; then I was tried for murder by a civil court and sentenced to be hung; *bah!* the thought of it nearly drives me mad as I write these lines.

"I escaped the gallows, not by friendship, but by bribery, and disguising myself I fled to Spain where my mother joined me, now utterly crushed by the turn affairs had taken.

"Receiving an officer's berth on board a vessel fitted out to cruise against the South American enemies of Spain, I went to sea once more, and believed that the tide in my life had turned for the better, and that, as soon as my friend returned to England he would acknowledge his marriage, and tell the innocent part I had played in it; but, alas! he went back to his home, and not one word did he say to raise the dishonor from my name, and seem-

ingly glad to be so aided by accident, he married the lady whom his father selected as his wife.

"This made me desperate, my son, and one day, when the captain of our cruiser boldly ran up the free rover's flag, and called upon his officers and crew to join him, we did so to a man.

"To continue, I soon rose to the rank of captain, and in a fast brigantine I swept the sea; but tiring of a lawless life I sought a home on this coast, and intended gradually to cut loose from my evil associations.

"By degrees I succeeded, and with the money I had won under the flag of a rover I built Storm Castle; but falling in love with your noble mother, I made her my wife; and then it was, as my brigantine, which was known as *El Diablo*, still continued to put into my island harbor, to pay me tribute, and fearing that the secret of my life would be made known in my new home—for Bendito, my lieutenant, and others knew it—I, one night of storm, wrecked the vessel by false beacons, and every soul on board perished. Now you know the lost spirits that dwell within the Haunted Ruin, for I feel and know that there are supernatural beings there.

"For twenty long years, my son, I have guarded my secret, and my mother, though I knew of her welfare, and her death a few years ago, never knew what became of me, as it was reported in Spain that our cruiser went down at sea.

"For twenty long years, Roland, I have loved your mother's memory, as dearly as I loved her in life, and upon you has my love fallen, almost with idolatry; but I am growing old now, and did I live to die a natural death, it would be only a few more years before I went to sleep everlasting in the orange grove. So I go forth to-morrow to meet a man in deadly combat, and with a fixed determination to die by his hand, for I shall not aim at his life.

"That man is the one whose children you saved from the panther some eight years ago, and whom I recognized as he drove up in the carriage with you.

"That man is the son of the man who killed my father, and the brother of the woman who died a suicide.

"That man is the brother of the one I killed in Spain in the *duello*, and the one whom I so seriously wounded in England. Now you know, my son, why I refused to see *Colonel Merton Randolph*.

"To his daughter you are engaged; you saved her life, and by her father's hand I will die; look back over memory's pathway and other graves dot it, of your name and his, who fell by violence.

"Can your blood and that in the veins of *Flora Randolph* mingle now in beings yet unborn?

"I place no veto against your actions; you are the judge of what you should do.

"From the stand-point of *Merton Randolph* he was right.

"From my stand-point I was right.

"God shall judge between us in the past and in the future.

"But press not this fatal *rendetta* further, my son, for, dying as I will by his hand, and without effort of mine to harm him, I will have my revenge.

"Betray not this my confession to you, for it is my dying wish.

"In my desk, in the secret drawer, you will find a diagram drawn in ink; it has no name upon it, but when you read my will, follow that diagram and you will understand all.

"And now, Roland my son, forever farewell.

"Your father,

"HENRY LEON."

The paper dropped from the hand of Roland St. Leon, and burying his face in his hands he cried:

"My poor, poor father! an outcast, a wanderer, and—a pirate! Oh Heaven have mercy, for my sorrows are more than I can bear."

CHAPTER XV.

THE MIDSHIPMAN'S LEGACY.

THE morning sun streaming through the library windows, at Hammersley Hall, found Roland St. Leon pacing the floor with the nervous and monotonous tread of a caged tiger.

His face was pale as the sea bronze would allow it to be, his eyes were sunken, deep lines were on his forehead, and his lips were set with the fierce emotion that welled up from his heart.

The copy of his father's will remained untouched upon the desk, for he had not noticed it after reading that terrible confession.

At length old Toby came into the room and asked him to come out to breakfast.

Mechanically he obeyed and seating himself at the table he dashed off several cups of strong coffee but left the tempting meal untouched.

From the breakfast-room he strolled out into the orange grove and at the graves of his parents he paused, for his father had been placed by the side of his mother.

All round the place, everywhere, there seemed to rest an air of neglect and desolation; the negroes on the plantation went mechanically to their work, and the crops looked as though they received but little attention; the garden walks were overgrown with weeds, and everywhere was neglect, excepting at the little graveyard; there the graves of the Hammersleys had been carefully tended, and particularly had the two mounds above the mortal remains of Don St. Leon and his wife been cared for, the task seeming to be a pleasure as well as a duty, for fresh flowers in vases stood at the head of each, and an anchor of red roses was upon one, and a cross of white roses upon the other.

"Could old Hannah and Toby have been thus kind? Noble old souls," he murmured, and then, as he remembered that his father had been slain, he said between his set teeth:

"Father, I will avenge you! ay, I will tear my love for her out of my heart, and bring dire vengeance upon *Merton Randolph*."

With burning eyes and excited manner he began his walk to and fro, until suddenly he started, and listening, heard the rapid fall of hoofs approaching.

Not wishing to be seen he darted into the surrounding foliage, and a moment afterward a horse dashed up and halted near the graves.

The rider was *Flora Randolph*, her face grown womanly and most sadly beautiful.

Holding his breath, Roland stood gazing upon her, saw her spring from her saddle, and with her hands full of flowers, approach the grave of his mother and strew thereon the floral offering.

Then she turned to the mound beneath which lay the man her father had slain, and with a touch even more gentle, laid flowers thereon.

Then, with a light bound she sprung into her saddle and dashed away, while from his inmost heart came the words from the white lips of Roland St. Leon:

"No, no, no, my hand shall never be raised against the life of *Merton Randolph*. Rather would I die, as my father has done, than wound by act of mine, the heart of yonder noble girl!"

Going back to the graves, he took from each of them one of the flowers just placed there,

and then slowly returned to the mansion, where Toby and Hannah were doing all they could to make the place look cheerful for the young master; but they little knew that even Paradise would have been gloomy to him then.

And thus the day passed, the young midshipman wandering listlessly about, speaking kindly to the servants he met, but appearing to avoid every one, preferring to be left alone with his own sad thoughts.

At length darkness crept over land and sea, and Hannah brought lights in, and the eyes of Roland fell upon the copy of his father's last will and testament.

Taking it up he broke the seal, and read it carefully through.

It left to him Hammersley Hall, which he had inherited from his mother's father, and the Don had been executor of, and the debts against the place.

The slaves of course went with the plantation, and the debts nearly equaled the value of the land, the mansion and the negroes.

This was all, and he said bitterly:

"When the debts of the estate are paid I will be little better than a pauper; but so be it, for I do not care."

But one clause of the will, and an *addenda*, Roland read over again, for there was something about it that surprised him; it read as follows:

"The island reef owned by me, and the stone mansion thereon, known as the Storm Castle, I leave as a *particular legacy* to my son Roland; he may not find it so utterly worthless as it seems now to be."

This was all, and yet the more he read it over the more he seemed puzzled.

"And the Storm Castle is then my legacy, for this place will go for debt; Storm Castle, with its owls, its bats, and its spooks and spirits, which I remember so well.

"This very night, twenty-one years ago, I was born there, and it will be a fitting spot for my abiding-place in the mood that I feel."

"Ha! I remember that my father speaks of a diagram in the secret drawer of his desk, and refers to it in connection with my inheritance; I will see to it."

Rising, he opened the secret drawer by touching a spring, the existence of which he had known since he was a boy, and immediately it opened; but not a single paper was within—the drawer was empty.

With some degree of interest he began to search through the different recesses of the desk, for he remembered that his father had kept there his jewels and his money; but nowhere could an object of the kind be found, and he gave up the search, with the idea that Judge Burton had them in his possession, and just then Toby came in to announce that very personage himself.

He was a large, dignified man, and greeted Roland kindly, adding:

"I was over at Magnolia Villa on some legal matters with the colonel, and on my way back to town met one of your servants, who told me you had arrived, so I concluded to call in."

"I am glad you did so, Judge Burton, for I

wished to see you; I will have your horses put up, and—"

"No, I cannot remain, thank you, as I must return to-night to town; but I left you a copy of your father's will, and a personal paper."

"I received them, and my father speaks of a diagram left in the secret drawer of his desk; I suppose you have it, and the jewels also that he kept there?"

"Why no; I had no idea of such a drawer. Perhaps Toby can tell something about them."

Toby was called, but could give no information on the subject, as he did not know of the secret drawer.

"It is a matter of no importance, I assure you, judge," said Roland, observing that the lawyer was worried about the lost paper and jewels, and thinking, from the heir's manner that their loss must be a matter of little importance, the judge took his leave, the midshipman promising soon to come up to town to see him.

But after the departure of the lawyer, Roland seemed to become nervous, for that missing paper greatly annoyed him, and the jewels had belonged to his parents, and for that he prized them, and not for their intrinsic value.

Suddenly he halted in his walk and said:

"It was a diagram of Storm Castle, and the secret, if secret there be, is there."

"Then I was a boy, but now I am not to be driven off by supernatural exhibitions."

"I will go to Storm Castle this night, for certainly am I in the humor to face even the devil should I find him there."

Putting on his belt of arms and leaving the mansion unobserved, for Toby and Hannah had retired to their cabin for the night, the young midshipman set forth to visit the mysterious legacy left him by his father, and if in his power to solve the secret of the Haunted Ruin.

CHAPTER XVI.

A DISCOVERY.

LEAVING the mansion on his perilous mission—for in those days superstition held full sway, and Roland really believed that the castle was haunted by spirits—he went down to the beach and springing into a small boat that he found there, he set the leg of-mutton sail and stood out of the inlet, wholly reckless of consequences.

In such a mood he was a dangerous man to contend against, and he was determined to try his nerve and strength with the denizens of the castle, be they who and what they might.

Laying his course for the land side of the island, he went swiftly along over the waters, and in an hour's time ran inshore.

Advancing boldly to the rear gate, the same by which he had entered years ago, he found it closed, and yet it yielded to his strength.

With a small lantern he had brought with him from the mansion, he lighted his way into the dark and damp passage and soon stood at the stone stairway.

Before, he had turned to the right, but now he would go to the left, and he was soon at the end of the rocky chamber.

There the cellarway ended, and not a discovery had he made nor a sound had he heard;

were the ghosts of the ruin abroad on some other duty than keeping watch and ward over the deserted place? he thought.

Retracing his way, he took the right passage at the stairs, determined after exploring that to ascend to the floor above.

But hardly had he gone a dozen paces, when there came to his ears a sound that caused him to come to a halt.

Listening attentively he heard a clinking sound, as though metal were striking stone.

Again moving on he saw the glimmer of a faint light ahead.

At last he had found a ghost at home, and instantly he intended to interview him.

As there was a light ahead of him, he would not need his own, and he placed it upon the stone flooring, and taking off his hat, put it over it, so that he was in almost total darkness.

Advancing once more he soon came to where the light grew stronger, and the sound that had at first arrested his attention became louder and louder.

Noiselessly he stole forward, and turning the bend in the passageway, the vaulted chamber, hollowed out of the solid rock, was before him.

Like one spellbound he stood for a moment, gazing upon the scene before him, for such his eyes never had fallen on before.

In the furthest corner of the vault crouched a huge form, bending over a large hole from which he had just removed a slab of rock, which seemed to have fitted there as part of the flooring.

By the side of the form was a ship's lantern, emitting a lurid light, which rendered everything around distinctly visible.

But the form, which looked human, and yet seemed supernatural, that was what riveted the eyes of Roland St. Leon.

Clad in a long white garment, belted at the waist, and with matted masses of shaggy hair and beard, the being was crouching over the cavity in the vault, and while he dragged up with his long fingers, hands full of golden coin, he was saying to himself, in a kind of chanting tone:

"Oh, beautiful gold! precious jewels, and priceless gems; I love you!

"Oh, gold that has caused man to sin from the creation of man, and jewels that have tempted woman to commit crime, and will ever do so, I love you!

"Oh, gold and jewels, what pleasures you will yet bring me out of this rugged world!"

He paused, and his head was turned sideways, as though to catch some sound; his breathing grew hard, and every nerve seemed to quiver.

Had Roland betrayed his presence by any sound?

No; the cunning, almost brute instinct of the creature told him of a presence unwelcome and uncommon there in that old ruin.

With a wild shriek, he dashed his lamp into the dark opening in the floor and it was shattered to atoms, and all was darkness.

Then followed a grating sound, as the slab went back to its place, and the next instant

shriek after shriek burst forth and rung through the vaulted chamber and passageway.

Now Roland St. Leon was all alert, for he knew that he had to deal with a madman, and he stood ready for the attack that he knew must come.

For an instant there was a dread silence, and then there came a rushing sound, and a clutch of iron was upon the hand of Roland that held the pistol; the weapon was dashed to the ground and he was in the arms of a giant.

But now was the time for Roland St. Leon to fight for his life, did he care to save it, and he exerted his powerful strength against that of his foe, and the two fell together upon the rocky flooring.

Finding that his enemy had the power to resist him, that his strength was a match for his own, the madman shrieked with frenzied rage, and over and over the two men rolled in the death-struggle, one fighting with the desperation of despair, and the other with the fury of a maniac.

But Roland St. Leon possessed muscles of steel, and his strength had always been considered marvelous, and he was able to cope with his huge adversary, madman though he was.

Finding that his every endeavor to reach the throat of his foe was fruitless, the madman fastened his teeth in the shoulder of the midshipman, at the same time growling savagely like a dog.

Had it not been for the clothing, he would have lacerated the flesh fearfully; but finding that it was impossible to subdue his antagonist, Roland made an endeavor to recover his sword, which had been torn from him in the struggle, and after a moment his hand touched it.

Shortening the blade by grasping it, he pressed it against the side of the madman, and said, firmly:

"Surrender, or I will drive this blade to your heart!"

The answer was a perfect howl, and a fiercer struggle, and then the keen blade was driven with terrific force into the madman's body.

A shriek, a more savage struggle, a blow, and Roland St. Leon fell back unconscious.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MYSTERY OF STORM CASTLE.

WHEN Roland St. Leon recovered consciousness he felt an oppressive weight upon him.

All was darkness around him, and putting forth his hand, it touched the head of his huge adversary, and instantly he recalled all that had happened.

Throwing the dead body from off him, he arose after an effort, and stood upon his feet, though he felt weak and dizzy from his long and fierce struggle, and his head was swollen from the blow he had received upon it, the last dying stroke of the madman.

Remembering where he had left his lantern, he went in search of it, and found it still burning brightly, to his great joy.

Seizing it, he retraced his way and by its light gazed upon the dead form of the man who had so nearly proven his murderer.

Over six feet in height, with broad shoulders and massive arms, it was no wonder that Roland

St. Leon had found in him a match for his strength, especially when taken into consideration that the man was without doubt a maniac.

The stone flooring was stained with blood all around, and the scanty attire of the madman and the uniform of the officer, gave evidence of the savage struggle they had had for mastery.

In the side of the madman was sticking the sword-blade, broken off, evidently by the wounded man rolling over and snapping it, at the pain it gave him.

The face of the man was large-featured, savage and cruel in the extreme, and his hair and beard were long, coarse and matted.

Having made these observations, Roland advanced, lantern in hand, toward the other end of the vaulted chamber, and after a slight search found the slab.

A careful scrutiny proved to him that the piece of rock was intended as a part of the stone flooring, and that it covered a treasure, was to be held as a secret, known only to the one to whom the riches beneath belonged.

With his broken sword he, after some difficulty, raised the heavy slab, and his eyes were almost dazzled by the splendor that met his astonished gaze, for the cavity, a foot in depth, was nearly full of gold-pieces, while scattered promiscuously upon the surface, were trinkets of gold and silver, bracelets, necklaces, earrings, and finger-rings, filled with precious stones.

Before him was a treasure of vast worth, and to whom did it belong?

In picking up an ivory box, beautifully carved, he discovered a piece of paper, which he at once seized eagerly, hoping it would give him some clue to the mystery before him.

And it did, for upon it was written in a hand he knew well: "A Diagram. For my son Roland."

The paper dropped from his hand back into the treasure hole, and over him swept a tide of remembrance, for he now saw that this was the legacy left him by his father, as, by following the diagram, it would have led him to this very spot.

And this treasure; how had it been won?

"Great God! it is his pirate treasure! Every piece of gold, and every jewel in there is stained with blood," he groaned aloud.

But even then his eye fell upon a nest of glittering jewels, and raising them he recognized them as his mother's. It was the necklace given her by his father for a wedding gift.

One by one he picked out the others that he remembered to have belonged to his mother, and then said slowly:

"No, he would not have given the woman he loved as he did my mother, jewels gained by piracy."

Then he cried aloud, as a thought flashed through his mind:

"But, how came these here? And this diagram too? These should have been in the secret drawer of my father's desk, for there he says he left the paper, and the jewelry I remember was always kept there."

"How came these things here?"

But that mystery he could not find out, puzzle his brain as he might, and hoping to solve it by a further exploration of the ruin he replaced the slab, took up his lantern, and started for the upper regions of Storm Castle.

Reaching the stairway he slowly ascended, for yet he knew not what peril he might have to face above, and he felt still weak and sore after his struggle.

After ascending some thirty stone stairs, he came out into an octagonal chamber, lighted by arched windows, in which the winds, had shattered all the glass.

It was a large room, extending clear across the width of the castle, and he knew that it must be the center tower, for from it upon either side diverged stone hallways.

In one of these, the right, he turned, and discovered that it ran through the center of the structure, with doors opening upon either side.

Proceeding to the end of this hallway, which was some fifteen feet in width, he came to the east tower, or turret, and the one upon which he had seen the solitary watchman, when he arrived on the coast the night before.

Was that solitary watchman now lying dead in the vaults below, or were there others in the crumbling ruins?

In this tower, which was smaller than the center one, the glass was all broken from the windows, and the sea breezes blew whistlingly through the passageways.

Trying the first door upon his left he opened it, and he started back as he beheld that it was fully furnished, though Time had sadly worn and tattered the furniture.

Adjoining this was a sitting-room, and then another bedchamber, and these three large apartments took up the one-half of that wing of the castle.

And in the last room he paused, for a glance around showed him that it had evidently been there that his mother had dwelt, had lived and suffered, and that he had been born.

With a feeling of emotion that almost choked him, he respectfully closed the doors and sought the rooms upon the other side of the hallway.

In these the fierce sea winds and dash of the spray had broken the windows and played sad havoc, for all within was ruined, and books, curiosities from many lands, chairs, divans and tables were scattered about and mingled together in the wildest confusion.

And thus he continued his search over the castle, until the eighteen rooms it contained and its three towers had been examined, and no living being found.

But nearly everywhere was ruin and confusion, decay and mold, showing that time was slowly destroying the old castle and all within.

Yet one discovery he did make, and that was the dwelling-room of the inmate he had slain.

It was in the second tier of the center tower, and the eight windows it contained commanded a most extensive view of land and sea in every direction.

And here the windows were not broken, but they were protected by boards that darkened the large chamber.

In one corner were barrels of stale provisions, some doubtless that had been left in the store-

rooms twenty years before, and others appearing as though they had been taken from the sea, and such had been the food of the madman who haunted the ruin.

But one thing surprised Roland more than all else, and that was there were *two beds* made down upon the floor.

The occupant of one he had slain; the occupant of the other he could not find.

But Roland St. Leon was not one to give up unaccomplished what he had undertaken, and having made a hasty survey of the entire ruin, he determined to return to Hammersley Hall, and the following night return to the castle, and there remain until every mystery connected with it was solved.

"It is my legacy, my inheritance, and I have the right, here, so I will tell old Toby I will be absent some time, and here I will remain until every secret is revealed."

So saying, he descended from the upper story of the tower, and glancing seaward, he started with surprise as he beheld not half a mile distant, gliding swiftly over the star-lit waters, a large schooner, *heading directly for the narrow gateway leading into the small harbor of Storm Castle.*

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN APPARITION IN THE VAULT.

WITH increased astonishment, Roland St. Leon watched the incoming vessel, as though it had been a phantom craft, for, although he had solved the ghost problem that haunted the ruin, he could not at once do away with every thought of the supernatural.

As the vessel neared the narrow, rock-guarded entrance to the Storm Castle, it slackened speed by lowering the foresail, though it was done without the creak of a block, or sound of a voice that the watcher in the turret could hear.

As though a sudden idea had struck him, Roland quickly took up his lantern, and guarding it from the light of those on the schooner, he ran hastily down the stone stairs and glided into the first room he had entered.

Hardly had he closed the door behind him, when, with a rushing sound like many wings in the air, the schooner ran into the castle basin, the helm was put hard down, the sharp bow swung round rapidly into the wind, and the anchor was lowered noiselessly into the water; in fact, every maneuver had been performed with skill and without a sound that an ear on the castle turret could have caught.

In a moment the vessel lay motionless upon the water; then a boat was lowered from the stern, and into it sprung half a dozen men, one of them taking the tiller, and as the four oarsmen gave way, steering it toward the water stairway, cut into the solid rock.

"And you think you had better go alone, senor?" asked a voice.

"Yes; it is best that I should. I will leave the door ajar, and, if you hear me whistle, come."

"We will be there, senor," answered the first speaker, and the other then sprung out on the steps and rapidly ascended to the wall, and then to the door opening into the center turret,

or tower, and the same one which the reader will remember Roland St. Leon tried to open, when a boy he made his visit to the ruin.

But this stranger seemed to better understand the secret of opening the portal, as, after passing his hands over its surface, it suddenly swung round on a central pivot.

Entering, he took a dark-lantern from under his pea-jacket, and passing through an arched doorway, found himself in the main hall, or center tower, from the center of which stone stairs led to the depths below, and also to the two stories above.

Ascending these rapidly, he soon stood in the upper part of the tower, which Roland had discovered to be the sleeping and storeroom of the madman and some companion, whoever that might be.

Flashing his light about the room, he glanced searchingly around him, and then descended to the vaults beneath the ruins, turning into the passageway leading to the right.

Without hesitation he walked on, until, with a cry of terror, he started back, his eyes staring, his face livid.

There, three feet in front of him, lay the huge form of the madman, weltering in blood.

"Dead!"

It was the only word that came from the man's lips, and springing to the side of the prostrate form, he bent over it, placing his hand upon the forehead.

"Cold as ice! He has been dead some time. Ha! here is a broken sword that tells how he died. In a fit of mad despair he has thrown himself upon it and taken his life."

Rising, he moved forward once more toward the corner of the vaulted chamber where lay the treasure; but again he started back in horror, and a cry broke from his lips and the lantern fell from his hands.

But it was not extinguished, and the light showed him a tall form before him, clad in a handsome uniform, and with gold-braided hat and dark plume upon his head.

The face was dark and stern, and the burning eyes seemed to look into his very soul, as without a motion, erect, and with hands folded upon his breast, the apparition stood in silence.

"*Madre de Dios!* It is Don St. Leon from the very grave!" gasped the man; and dropping upon his knees and clasping his hands, he began to say his prayers with lightning-like rapidity.

"What do you here, vile man, robbing this old ruin of the treasure herein hidden?"

The voice was almost sepulchral in its depth, and the frightened man gasped forth:

"Mercy, oh! good captain. I believed you in your grave, and that you would no longer need the treasure."

"From whence come you?"

"From the Indies, Senor Don St. Leon," answered the man in Spanish, for in that language had he first spoken.

"Fool, let this farce end; I am not Don St. Leon, but his son, and my pistol covers your heart, so answer my questions truthfully as I put them."

"I cannot do otherwise, when my life is at

stake," sullenly said the man, eying the pistol which Roland had pointed at him.

"See that you do; this castle has been believed the abiding-place of spirits for years; who were those supposed ghosts?"

"One lies dead yonder, and doubtless by your hand, but how you conquered that giant I cannot understand."

"You will, if I have occasion to take hold of you; what other *spirits* were here?"

"Myself."

"Only you two?"

"Yes, senor," and there was a tone of respect in the man's voice that he could not suppress, for that stern face before him commanded it.

"How came you two men here?"

"The brigantine your father once commanded, and to which I succeeded, was wrecked running in here one night of storm; we did not know the place was deserted, and the watch on deck doubtless mistook lights on the shore for the signals at the harbor entrance, and we dashed upon the rocks."

"And you two alone escaped?"

"Yes, senor; myself and yonder dead man, who was my second lieutenant, was a powerful swimmer, and saved my life, though we were thrown stunned and bleeding upon the rocks."

"And here you two have dwelt ever since?"

"Yes, senor; that is, until a few weeks since; when I left."

"And why? Mind you, your life hangs upon your words."

"*Madre de Dios*, how like your father you are, senor; the very look, his clothes and all."

"These clothes I found in a chest in the room that was my father's, and I put them on to try their effect on the men that would come here in the schooner that I saw running in; now answer my question."

"I left here, senor, when one day from the turret we saw your father fall in a duel."

"Why did you leave then?"

"*Maldito!* you question like a lawyer, senor; but I will tell you."

"In the long years we remained here it was for a purpose; we knew that your father left his treasure here and we were searching for it; Great God! year after year went by and we could not find it, and at last I determined to visit your father and force the secret from him, under pain of exposing him as a pirate chief."

"I visited his home by night; going ashore in a rude boat we made here, and a dangerous trip it was, too."

"Reaching his home, I beheld him making his will, for he talked aloud, and then he drew a plan of this castle and placed it in a secret drawer of his desk; all this I saw through the blinds."

"I determined not to face him then, for he was a dangerous man when roused, but to return after the duel, for he was talking to himself about it."

"Well, with my glass from the turret, I saw him fall, and, after the house was deserted, I again effected an entrance into the library, and removed the diagram."

"And the jewels and gold you found there?"

"Yes, senor; then I returned to the castle

and with my companion, found the treasure; but at sight of it he went raving mad."

"Finding that his reason would not return to him, I determined to leave the treasure under his charge, knowing that he would guard it well, and one day, noticing a ship three leagues away, becalmed, I intrusted myself to my little boat, towing a plank after me."

"It was dark when I set out and in four hours I was near the ship, and setting my boat adrift, I got on the plank, and hailing the vessel, was picked up and taken on board, where I represented myself as a shipwrecked sailor. Now you know all, senor."

"No, I do not; I do not know what brought you back here and who these men are that came with you."

"I came for the treasure, senor, and my comrades are buccaneers; I knew their haunts, sought them out, and upon condition that I should be their chief, I promised them vast riches."

"Your name?"

"Bendito, senor."

"Well, Senor Bendito, this treasure is mine, and I have the disposal of it; but I will be generous, for I will share with you and the crew, but upon one condition."

"Name it, senor."

"*That I be your chief.*"

"Ah, senor, gladly; I will follow your lead as willingly as I did your father."

"And now as to your vessel?"

"She is an armed schooner, senor; she was the finest and fastest craft in Lafitte's fleet, and we cut her out at night, to go buccanering on our own account, after we had come here after the treasure."

"And your crew?"

"Ninety all told, senor; and as wild a set of devils as ever cut a throat."

"Enough! Now let your men come with sacks and remove this treasure. All that I care to have I will now take out."

"As to who I am the men need not know, and I will make them understand that I am their chief; now obey me, Lieutenant Bendito!"

There was that in the cool, determined and reckless manner of Roland St. Leon, that caused Bendito to obey him as he had his father, nearly a quarter of a century before; and he departed from the vault and soon after returned with the boat's crew, and the officer who had come ashore in the boat with him.

Bendito had doubtless already made some explanation regarding Roland, to the boat's crew, for without a word they obeyed his orders in removing the treasure, and in half an hour after the fleet schooner was standing swiftly out to sea, with the daring youth, who had so recklessly thrown his fortunes with a band of buccaneers, standing upon her deck, and gazing with a sad look in his dark eyes, back upon the shores of Florida, where dwelt the maiden from whom a cruel fate had divided him, and in whose sacred soil his parents were sleeping their last sleep.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE COLONEL'S STORY.

"We might as well try to catch the Fly-

ing Dutchman, Mr. Randolph, as yonder schooner."

"Yes, sir; she is running away from us with no topsails set, and we've got the Heron dressed in her very best."

"We can do no better, that is certain; and yet, if she runs in-shore, Randolph, we may head her off."

"I hope so, Captain Mayo, for it would be a great thing to capture that craft."

The speakers were Captain Mayo, a thorough type of the American naval officer, and commander of the United States sloop-of-war, Heron, and one of his junior lieutenants, Mark Randolph, grown from the boy into a handsome young fellow in his twentieth year.

Other officers and all the crew were eagerly watching the chase of a large schooner they had sighted at sunrise and been in pursuit of all day, yet with little hope of overhauling the fleet craft, which kept ahead and just out of range of the bow guns.

The schooner was certainly a suspicious-looking craft, crouching in the water like a hound about to spring, and with a narrow hull and very lean stern, while her bows were as sharp as a wedge.

Her masts ran up like needle-points, were exceedingly tall, and when the schooner changed her course, it was seen that they raked as saucily as the most daring buccaneer afloat could desire.

When the Heron first sent a shot after the rakish craft to make her show her colors, she had shown the British colors at her peak; but when she had started off in flight she had lowered her flag and afterward disdained to fly another.

As darkness drew near, the schooner had run close in-shore, and her hull and spars mingled with the forest and land, until she became invisible to the eyes of those who watched narrowly for her from the Heron's deck.

"You should know this coast well, Randolph, as you say you live not far away," said Captain Mayo, after sweeping the coast in vain for a glimpse of the schooner.

"Do you see that heavy forest, captain?"

"Yes."

"Well, sir, I live just at the edge of that, to the left—there! yonder light is in my home, Magnolia Villa; but though I have often sailed along this coast when a boy, I was always in company with a friend who acted as pilot and commander of the craft, and I never studied the channels. By the way, sir, I refer to one who I believe was an officer under you—Roland St. Leon."

"Ah, yes, and a gallant one, too, besides being a born sailor; but I do not know what to make of him, as he positively promised to meet me at Mobile when his leave expired, and had he done so would have gone as second in command of the privateer schooner that was fitted out to take a cruise against British commerce, now that the war has broken out."

"It is strange that Roland was not on time, sir; he was, as a boy, always most punctual."

"So I always found him, Randolph; but I waited for him a week before I let Huber take his place. It is a little over four months now

since I put him ashore near here, one night, to visit his home."

"His plantation lies up the coast, there, sir, about two leagues. If he was on board now, we could catch yonder schooner, for he knows these waters better than any man living," replied Mark Randolph.

For a few moments Captain Mayo was silent, and then he said:

"I'll tell you what it is, Randolph; you are so near your home, we will run in as close as we dare, and while we blockade the schooner for the night, I will go with you to visit your father and sister for it has been a long time since you saw them, you said."

"Ah, sir if you only would do me that kindness! You will be welcomed warmly at the villa which I have not seen for two years."

"And while we are there, sir, I will send over to Hammersley Hall and find out about St. Leon, sir, for if he is at home yonder schooner is ours."

"All right: order the quartermaster to stand in-shore as far as you think we dare go."

Giving the necessary orders, and taking his stand near the helm, Mark Randolph acted as pilot, for he knew the coast sufficiently well to know how far the sloop dare go in.

At length, within half a mile of the coast, and opposite the entrance of an inlet into which every lookout said the schooner had gone, the Heron was brought to, the anchor was let fall and a boat ordered alongside, into which Mark at once embarked for their visit to Magnolia Villa.

Ordering the officer of the deck to keep a bright lookout for the schooner, and signal with three heavy guns fired in quick succession, if they discovered her putting to sea, the cutter shoved off, and under eight oars was sent rapidly shoreward, Mark Randolph at the helm.

After a row of half an hour they landed upon a cedar-crowned point, and leaving the boat to await their return, the captain and his young officer set out for the villa, distant a little more than a mile from the beach.

As they wended their way through the park, Mark showed to his commander the scene of the panther affair, and told the story of how Roland St. Leon's deadly aim and steady nerve had saved his sister and himself from a fearful death.

"Roland St. Leon is a remarkable man, Randolph; a handsomer one I never saw, or one of greater nerve and pluck. Why, he jumped overboard twice while sailing with me, to save a seaman from drowning, and on one occasion it was two hours before we picked him up, for it was blowing great guns and the night pitch dark! but we found him, and he had saved his man, and was aiding him to keep from sinking when they were picked up."

"The seaman was ill for weeks after it, wholly unnerved; but, bless my soul if St. Leon wasn't as cool as though he had merely been taking a bath, and half an hour after was singing love-songs on deck; I do hope we will find him at home, for I could easily forgive his not joining me at Mobile then."

Thus conversing the two officers continued on their way, and soon approached the mansion, where a light was visible in the library.

Ascending the steps, two persons arose to greet them, and with a glad cry Flora threw herself in the arms of her brother, while his father welcomed him most affectionately, and Captain Mayo received a warm greeting from both.

"We were seated out here enjoying the balmy air, and watching the lights of your vessel as it rose and fell on the waves," said Colonel Randolph in his deep tones.

"Yes, we chased a schooner in-shore, and I was glad to give Mark a chance for a run home, as he was willing to bring me for company; did you see the schooner, Colonel Randolph?"

"Yes, sir; we watched her for a long time, and remarked upon her beauty and speed; is she English?"

"I rather lean to the idea that she is a buccaner, sir, for a number of my crew who have cruised much in southern waters, pronounce her a pirate; but either English or freebooter, I would like to capture her."

"She is somewhere in-shore, now, sir, and cannot get to sea well without your discovering her; but come in, Captain Mayo, and we'll have a glass of wine to your success."

The party then adjourned to the dining-room, and Mark Randolph fairly started as he caught sight of his father and sister in the bright glare of the lights.

The former looked ten years older than when he had last seen him, and the sad expression of his face had deepened painfully, and his mouth grown almost severe in its sternness, while Flora had budded forth into beautiful womanhood; but she was dressed in deep black, and oh! how sad and white she looked.

"Father! Flora! in the name of Heaven what has changed you so since I last saw you?" cried the young officer.

Flora looked pained at the question, but Colonel Randolph said, quietly:

"Time works wonders, my son, and you, too, are greatly changed, and promoted to a lieutenantcy, your letter of two months ago told us; accept my congratulations."

"And mine, too, brother Mark."

"He is deserving of the honors he has won, sir, and I may say that your coast here has produced two of the finest young officers in the service. I refer to that splendid fellow, Roland St. Leon, and your son Mark."

A dead silence fell upon the room at the mention of that name, and while Colonel Randolph turned livid, Flora seemed deeply moved, and the emotion of both could not fail to be observed by both the officers.

Remembering the love existing between his sister and Roland, noticing that she was dressed in deep black, and observing that it was the name of his boyhood friend that seemed to move so deeply both Flora and his father, while he was in utter ignorance of all that had happened, Mark said anxiously:

"Have I wounded you, sir, and has aught befallen Roland St. Leon?"

Flora turned her face away, but her father

again answered, speaking with perfect calmness, yet with evident pain:

"Of the fate of Mr. St. Leon, my son, we can tell you nothing; he came home on leave some three months since, and the second night of his stay, we learn, he most mysteriously disappeared, while a sail-boat belonging to the plantation was picked up down the coast adrift, and cap-sized, so that it is thought that he was lost while out sailing."

"Great God grant that such be not the case, sir. This is indeed sad news. It must have been a sad blow to his family," said Captain Mayo.

"He has no family, sir; only his father," responded Mark, deeply moved by the unknown fate of his friend; and then he added:

"Captain Mayo, to-morrow we will drive over and see Don St. Leon."

"My son," and the deep voice of Colonel Randolph never quivered, "it pains me deeply to also inform you that Don Enrique St. Leon is dead."

"Dead! can you mean it, father?"

"Yes, he died some nine months since."

"This is indeed sad news; Roland's fate unknown, and his father dead! May I ask what was the cause of the Don's death, father?" asked Mark with deepest interest.

"Yes, my son; he fell in a duel," was the calm reply.

"A duel, and with whom? Who was the slayer of poor Don St. Leon, father?" and Mark's manner was that of indignant anger.

"Mark," and Colonel Randolph's tone grew deeper, "Don St. Leon had a life-long feud with a man who sought his life, and at last he fell by his hand: need I tell you, my son, that it pains me to say that it was I who killed Don Enrique?"

Had a cannon-ball torn through that library just then, it could not have caused more astonishment than was depicted upon the face of Captain Mayo and Mark Randolph; the former remained silent because he knew not what to say, while the latter could not, for the life of him, utter one word.

With the pause of an instant, Colonel Randolph went on in the same deep and even tones:

"Having said what I have upon this painful subject, I will add more: Captain Mayo, Roland St. Leon saved the lives of my two children years ago, and he and my daughter here were engaged; but meeting Don St. Leon, and burning under a sense of, as I then believed, shameful wrong, I challenged him to keep up the vendetta between his name and mine, which had begun with our fathers."

"Don St. Leon accepted my challenge, met me, and while, I shame to say it, he fired in the air, I shot him through the heart—nay, listen, Mark, and let me fill my cup of bitterness to the brim and then drain it to the dregs. When Roland St. Leon disappeared so mysteriously, old Toby, the negro servant who had charge of the place, found on the floor of his room a closely-written paper, and not being able to read, he gave it to Flora, who was near the estate at the time on horseback, and she placed it in my hands."

"That paper was a confession from Don St.

* At the time of which I write, mails were received but twice a year in some parts of the country.

Leon to his son, and it told me that which I had never before suspected, and that was how deeply my family had wronged him.

"It is too late now to repair the past, and I can only live on and suffer until I find rest in the grave."

Had Captain Mayo, and also Mark, momentarily condemned Colonel Randolph in their minds, now all censure was gone, and the deepest sympathy took its place, and the latter said with trembling voice:

"Forgive me, father."

Captain Mayo silently held forth his hand, and without other reference to the sad affair, Colonel Randolph said pleasantly:

"We have not drank to your promotion yet, my son. Come, Flora."

As white as a marble statue, and almost as cold, Flora accepted a glass of wine, handed her by Captain Mayo, and the colonel proposed a toast.

"Now, Flora, order a substantial supper, please, for sailors are I believe always hungry," remarked the colonel, pleasantly, and the maiden turned to obey, when a tall form stood in the doorway, and she started back in some alarm, as she recognized a stranger in full uniform.

CHAPTER XX.

CAPTAIN SEABOLT.

THE individual who, so suddenly and unannounced, put in an appearance in the doorway of the dining-room at Magnolia Villa, was slightly over six feet in height, possessed square, broad shoulders, a small waist, and perfect limbs, as his tight-fitting uniform displayed to advantage.

A belt was around his waist, upholding a handsome, jewel-bilted sword, and his pantaloons were stuck in handsome top-boots, while a soft hat, ornamented with a sweeping black plume, and encircled by a cord of gold, surmounted his head, and white gauntlet gloves incased his hands.

With a full black beard falling to his waist, a strange and uncommon ornament for the face in those days, and curling black hair that clustered about his neck and fell upon his shoulders, his features were mostly concealed, but his eyes were strangely piercing and full of fire.

That he was not an American naval officer his exceedingly elegant, almost fanciful uniform denoted, and in fact his whole make-up was that of a handsome buccaneer chief.

Raising his hat politely, yet replacing it at once upon his head, he said in a rich, deep voice:

"Pardon me, senorita, and senores, this unwarrantable intrusion; but being friendly to the American Government, and knowing one of its vessels to be in great danger, I came to warn you."

"Ha! what mean you, sir?" cried Captain Mayo, eagerly advancing toward the remarkable looking stranger, who answered quietly:

"I mean, sir, that your vessel lies just within an inlet, with a heavily wooded point of land upon its port quarter, and an island with a huge stone structure upon it, to the starboard a league."

"True, sir, and what then?"

"You chased a schooner inshore this evening, sir, and you did not notice that, close in under that heavily wooded point of high land lay a large frigate, a sloop-of-war, and a brig, and they are English."

"Great heavens! can this be true? If so I am in danger where I lie."

"It is not only true, sir, but when you dropped anchor, the sloop-of-war was seen to make a circuit, two leagues out, and approach you from the east; the frigate is to stand out and blockade you, and the brig run in and attack you as soon as the first vessel gains her position."

Captain Mayo turned very pale, and yet he seemed to desire to doubt the truth of what he heard, and asked:

"And who are you, sir, that brings this information?"

"I command the schooner you chased inshore this evening, sir."

"Ha! you are then—"

"Captain Seabolt, of the schooner Sea-Viper."

"Such is your name, sir, I do not doubt; but your occupation is what?"

"Men call me a buccaneer," was the cool response.

Instantly both Captain Mayo and Mark Randolph dropped their hands upon their swords, but the stranger only smiled, as he said:

"I did not place myself in jeopardy, gentlemen, to be bullied; I came in good faith to tell you that your vessel would be attacked at day-break, perhaps even to-night, and to offer to save you."

"Bah! your vessel is in a tight place, Sir Buccaneer, and you wish to get me out of the way so that you can escape," said Captain Mayo.

"I will not quarrel with you, sir, for your words, for men who are called pirates have no character for honesty or truth; but I tell you frankly, if you do not accept my offer to aid you, I will be at sea in the morning, while you are a prisoner to the British."

There was something so honest in the man's manner and tone, that all seemed impressed by it, and Flora Randolph said, almost abruptly:

"I am confident he speaks the truth, Captain Mayo."

"Thank you, kind senorita," and the plumed hat was again raised.

"And how can you save my vessel, may I ask?"

"By the same channel through which I intend to put to sea."

"You know these waters, then, sir?"

"Perfectly, sir; I will go on board your own vessel and pilot you out, leaving my schooner to follow us to sea, where we will join her."

"And your terms, sir?"

"Simply that you will give me time to get away from you, and not sink me with one of your heavy broadsides."

"I accept your terms; save the Heron, and you shall be at liberty to rejoin your vessel; play me false, and I will kill you with my own hand."

"Even so. I accept your terms, sir; I am ready now, and the sooner the better," coolly said the strange man.

"You will join us in a glass of wine, sir, I

hope, before you leave?" and Colonel Randolph turned to the commander of the schooner.

"Thank you, no," was the cold response, and again bowing he turned away.

Farewells were at once spoken, and then Captain Mayo and Mark took their leave, joining Captain Seabolt, as he had called himself, out upon the piazza.

"We will be, oh! so 'anxious, Mark, to know that you have escaped to sea," cried Flora, as the three walked away.

Instantly Captain Seabolt turned and said:

"Senorita, you know where lies the old ruin on the island?"

"Yes, sir."

"As soon as the brig is safe I will run for the castle, and display a red light upon its western turret."

"But are you in no danger, sir? You said the sloop stood off in that direction."

"My vessel is as fleet as the wind, senorita; I know these waters well; and the Sea-Viper will never be taken," and Captain Seabolt again walked on with the captain and Mark, and in fifteen minutes more they reached the beach where the boat awaited them.

"May I take the tiller, sir?" quietly asked Captain Seabolt when they were seated.

"Do so, sir."

"Give way, men!"

There was something in the commanding voice that made the seamen understand that they had a sailor at the helm, and they pulled with a will, but the boat did not head in the direction of where the sloop-of-war was lying at anchor.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE RED SIGNAL.

"WHERE do you head, sir?" asked Captain Mayo, somewhat anxiously, as he saw the course the mysterious pilot was taking.

"Do you see that dark object yonder, sir?"

"Yes, it is a vessel."

"It is the Sea Viper captain."

"Hold! your life will be the forfeit, if you betray us."

"So you have before said, sir; I am not going to board my vessel, only to tell the officer in charge to get under way and follow the sloop out to sea."

By this time the cutter was quite near the graceful and saucy-looking vessel, and then came sharply over the waters:

"Boat ahoy!"

"Ay, ay, sir; Sea-Viper," replied the deep tones of the commander.

"Is it you, Captain Seabolt?"

"Yes, Mendez; get under way and head over to yonder shore, then come close in the wake of the sloop-of-war and follow me out to sea."

"Ay, ay, senor captain," came the answer, and the cutter was then headed seaward, toward where the Huron lay.

A row of ten minutes brought them alongside, and a moment after the boat was at the davits, and the anchor was being slowly and quietly hauled aboard, while Captain Mayo invited his strange guest to the cabin to join him in a glass of wine.

"Captain, do you see yonder dark object off your port quarter?"

"Yes, now I have my glass upon it; 'tis a sloop-of-war."

"True, and dead astern as we now lie, you can just see the frigate; their lights are out, and they have no sail set, so as to prevent being seen, and are towing in with their boats; around yonder dark point lies the brig, awaiting the signal to stand in as near as she dare and attack you."

"And you can take us safely out to sea, Captain Seabolt?" asked Captain Mayo, with more respect for his pilot than he had before shown.

"I can, sir; as the anchor is up I will now take the helm, and we need but sail enough to give her steerageway."

A few moments more and the sloop was forging ahead, and her course lay directly for the land.

All were now deeply interested upon the vessel, for the news had spread already, that Seabolt the Buccaneer was their pilot, and the excitement increased when shortly after, the Sea-Viper dropped in their wake.

Steadily the two vessels held on nearing the land, and seemingly running bows on; but gradually a narrow opening was visible, and soon the sloop entered a narrow inlet, seemingly little more than a canal, between two dark forests.

But a strong draught of wind blew through the opening, and the vessels were driven slowly on, under their light sails, for nearly a league, when a bend in the channel brought them in view of open water.

A cheer was upon the lips of the crew, but it was suppressed, and ten minutes after, the Heron had gained a good offing.

"Ho! the Sea-Viper!" suddenly called out the pilot.

"Ay, ay, sir," floated back the response from the schooner.

"Crack on sail and run up under the sloop's quarter; I will board as we sail along."

"Ay, ay, sir," and as the white sails were spread upon the Sea-Viper, Captain Seabolt turned and said to Captain Mayo:

"I have kept my word, sir; your enemies are foiled."

"And I will keep mine, sir; but tell me, why have you served me, to-night?"

"I am an American, sir. My schooner is here; farewell, senores!" and as the sharp bow of the Sea-Viper ran close up to the quarter of the Heron, Captain Seabolt gave a mighty bound and alighted upon his own deck.

"Lieutenant Randolph, I will now run down and keep my word to your sister, and then I'll draw those British vessels off the coast by letting them chase me," called back the strange man, and he headed for Storm Castle, though he knew his course would carry him under the broadside of the English ships.

One hour after, the officers of the Heron saw a bright red light upon the western turret of Storm Castle, and immediately after lurid flames shot up from the old ruin, and in a short while the whole pile was ablaze, the wood-work catching rapidly!

And other eyes saw that red signal set, for

Colonel Randolph and Flora were upon the piazza, and then they beheld, too, the burning ruin, and calling for the carriage they sprung in and were driven rapidly down to the beach.

Miles away to the eastward, and out of danger they saw the Heron, by the light of the burning ruin, and there, in the full glare, boldly standing out to sea was the Sea-Viper under full sail, while rushing toward her over the brilliantly illuminated waters, were the three British vessels.

"That is a daring fellow; Flora, see how leisurely he takes it; and hark! he is actually opening fire upon his huge foes," said Colonel Randolph.

"I do not believe he is a buccaneer, father, he seemed too noble, and he certainly saved the Heron. Oh! see how the British vessels are firing at him; pray Heaven he escape harm," said Flora, earnestly.

And there stood father and daughter, watching by the light of the burning Storm Castle, the little schooner flying seaward, chased by the three English, until the fire gradually died away, and darkness settled upon the deep, for the massive structure was now indeed but a blackened ruin.

CHAPTER XXII.

SEA-VIPERS AHOY!

THREE years have passed away since Storm Castle went up in flames, that night on the Florida coast, when a man with the brand of buccaneer upon his name, saved an American vessel from capture or destruction.

In those years changes have come along that sunny shore, for the old homestead of Hammersley Hall has long been deserted; the slaves were sold for debt, and had been scattered far and wide throughout the land; but old Toby and "Aunt Hannah," had been purchased by Colonel Randolph, and they still lived at their old cabin to care for the desolate plantation, that all might not go to ruin, for the colonel had also become the owner of the Hall when it went under the hammer.

And in those years the stern, sad-eyed colonel had passed away, leaving his beautiful daughter alone at the villa, for her gallant brother was off at sea in the service of his country.

And old Storm Castle, black and grim in ruin, still stood like a gigantic sentinel, shunned and dreaded as much as ever; in fact each year that passed but added to the superstitious horror felt for the island structure.

The war between England and the United States was on the eve of ending, and the hope of a speedy peace was in every breast, and the home circle daily looked for the soldier and the sailor loved one to return to their hearthstones covered with glory.

Watching and waiting, longing and hoping for her brother's return, for oh how sad and lonely she was, Flora Randolph was wont to ride each day along the coast, followed by a servant, and would almost invariably extend her road as far as the cabin of old Toby and Hannah, as she gazed out wistfully over the waters, looking for a sail, as her last letter from her brother had told her that he would touch at home ere he sailed north.

Marvelously beautiful, yet oh so sad-eyed, looked Flora as she rode away from home on her daily afternoon horseback gallop, and reaching the coast she suddenly drew rein, for there only a league distant was a fine brig-of-war heading inshore, and astern came a sloop-of-war.

And, as she looked there came the deep boom of a heavy gun, and then came fierce and rapid firing, and Flora knew that it was a sea chase.

At the peak of the leading vessel flew the stars and stripes, and from the pursuing craft floated the flag of Great Britain.

"Richard, yonder brig I know is my brother's. He wrote me he had been placed in command of a brig-of-war; and see, she is running in here as if to escape from her large foe! Heaven protect him!" cried Flora earnestly.

"He's a flyer, Missy Flora, and no mistake; but that big vessel have got mighty loud guns, I tell yer," answered Richard, and he seemed to be anxious that his mistress should get back to the villa.

But Flora remained seated upon her horse, watching with intense interest the chase, and mentally praying that the brig would escape.

In the mean time the little brig was under clouds of canvas heading shoreward, as if to run into an inlet, and thereby throw her pursuer off her course, while she was keeping up a rapid and telling fire from her stern guns.

The Englishman also fired rapidly, yet not with precision, and the American had been most fortunate in escaping her heavy fire.

"The brig is trying to get Storm Castle Island between her and her adversary," said Flora, and she sighed heavily, as her eyes rested upon the old ruin, for her heart held a buried love in it for the man who had so mysteriously left his home years before, and whose face was yet unknown.

"There! she's got it now, Missy Flora," cried Richard, as when the brig changed her course a shot from the sloop struck her square in the bows, cutting away her bowsprit, and bringing down her jibs and stay-sails with a run.

Instantly the American broached to, but she was pluckily handled, and while men crowded forward to repair the damage, her broadside was turned upon the sloop with terrific earnestness.

"Heaven have mercy upon them! there is no escape now, for the English vessel is treble the size of the brig; my poor, poor brother," lamented Flora, and she covered her face with her hands, as the British craft swept swiftly down upon her little foe, pouring in a rapid fire to kill now that he had wounded her.

"Great golly! Missy Flora, look there!"

The startled cry of Richard caused Flora to quickly raise her head from her hands, and glancing in the direction indicated by the negro, she beheld, just creeping out of the harbor of Storm Castle, and hitherto concealed from view by the ruins, a large schooner, carrying clouds of canvas, and lying low in the water.

"God grant she be an enemy to the Englishman!" said Flora, and then she sadly added: "it could do no good, for both vessels would be no match for the sloop."

"Missy Flora, don't you know that there wessil?"

"No, Richard, and yet it does look familiar."

"Well, Missy Flora, that am the craft that saved the Heron one night, and sot fire to ther castle, and then you remembers how she fought a brig off here a year ago, and captured her!"

"You are right, Richard; that is the Sea-Viper; I see her strange figure-head of Satan distinctly," cried Flora excitedly.

"Yes, missy, and her boss am a fighter, I tells yer. Why, ther folks in town calls him a pirate, but they do say he's an American, and always tooks up for American wessils, and he's a-running mighty peert now to get into that muss, I tells you."

Richard's words were indeed true, for the schooner seemed not in the least alarmed, and was running down upon the Englishman under a press of canvas, that made her fly over the waves.

And it was evident that those on the sloop had not seen her, so taken up were they with the brig; but luffing up suddenly the schooner poured a broadside into the Englishman that was certainly a startling surprise, and well aimed, did considerable damage.

Rallying quickly the Englishman returned the fire with a broadside, but no material damage was done on the schooner, and the brig being nearer, the sloop again turned upon her, and ran down upon her with the evident intention of boarding and ending the American, and then turn upon the new-comer.

"The schooner flies a blood-red flag, and with glass, I can distinctly see her tall commander upon her deck; though he seems not to wear his long beard," said Flora, attentively regarding first one vessel and then the other.

Running down upon the crippled brig, the Englishman swept around, and after sending a broadside *en passant* at the schooner, laid alongside; the commander of the American, seeing that the schooner was daringly coming to his rescue, determined upon a desperate resistance.

But the large crew of the sloop swept the men of the brig back from their guns, and the American, to save his gallant tars, was about to cry out that he struck his flag, when he saw the schooner right aboard, and determined to hold out still longer.

Then came a shock as the schooner ran alongside, and a thrilling voice shouted:

"Sea-Viper, follow me!"

With a magnificent bound a tall form sprung upon the deck of the brig, a cutlas in one hand and a pistol in the other, and like flying missiles his men followed him, hurling themselves, reckless of consequences, upon the vessels, throwing somersets over the heads of the fighting men and falling into their midst.

With red shirts and skull-caps, they were a wild-looking set, and full a hundred in number they forced the British back upon their own decks, and with terrific yells and fighting with the desperation of demons, they demoralized their foes, and soon the cry went up for quarter, as the sloop's crew broke in disorder, in spite of the efforts of her commander to check them.

"Do you surrender your vessel, sir?" and the

schooner's leader bounded in front of the sloop's commander, who was a large, determined-faced man with iron-gray hair.

"To whom, sir?" was the curt question.

"To me, sir, Captain Seabolt of the schooner-of-war Sea-Viper," said the leader.

"Bah! of the pirate craft, you mean, for I know you well, sir," was the insulting reply.

"You mistake, sir; I sail under my own flag, for I have no other; but never have I committed an unlawful act upon the high seas, though I have hunted your ensign wherever I could find it. Do you surrender your vessel, sir?"

"Not to you, sir, but to the American commander."

"Sea-Vipers, ahoy!"

A yell burst from the red-shirted crew.

"Shall I turn my bloodhounds loose again, sir?" was the grim question.

The Englishman hesitated, and there arose among his men a cry to strike his flag; they had heard of the Sea-Viper, and they stood in mortal fear of her crew.

"I have no alternative, sir, but to strike my colors."

"But *your* individual surrender I will not accept, sir."

"What mean you, sir?" asked the surprised and indignant Englishman.

"You are Lord Clingham Vane?"

"I am, sir."

"Then I hold you responsible upon your own deck for your treachery years ago to one whose life you made a curse, and which curse descended upon me to imbitter my life," and Captain Seabolt spoke with terrible earnestness.

"In Heaven's name, who are you?" cried the Englishman.

"I am the son of the man your treachery made an outcast, a felon, and a wanderer—I am the son of Henry Leon!"

Lord Clingham Vane staggered back, while there arose from the crowd a voice speaking a simple name:

"Roland St. Leon!"

"You are armed, sir! Draw and defend yourself, and may the best man win!"

As he spoke the commander of the Sea-Devil, now known to be none other than Roland St. Leon, advanced cutlass in hand upon the Englishman, who sprung to meet him with the fury of despair, for his guilty act toward Henry Leon crowded upon him in all its vileness.

A short, fierce encounter, with the crews of the three vessels commingled and looking on, and Roland St. Leon cut the Englishman down in his tracks—a groan, a gasp, and Henry Leon was avenged by his son.

Coolly turning, he met the eyes of Captain Randolph fixed upon him, and seemingly uncertain how to act.

"Captain Randolph, the sloop-of-war is your prize, sir; take her," he said, quietly.

"No, St. Leon—no, Roland; you saved my vessel, my crew, and myself, and you are the victor; here, I offer you my hand in the pure friendship of old, for your father and mine lie in their graves—"

"Your father dead?" broke from the lips of Roland St. Leon.

"Yes; and he died of a broken heart for the

life he took; for the confession of your father to you, left in your home, Toby brought to him to read, and he saw how he had wronged him through all. There lies the cause of their past deeds, and you are avenged on him; now, let us bury the past in the graves of the dead, and clasp hands in friendship, as in the olden time!"

Mark Randolph spoke with a depth of feeling that touched the heart of Roland, and he replied, while his voice trembled:

"Three years ago, I was a desperate man; but accident placed me in command of yonder vessel and crew.

"The craft was a pirate then, and her crew were buccaneers; but I metamorphosed them into honest men, and as an Independent Privateer I have cruised against the enemies of my land."

"And won a noble name, every officer of our navy will admit, and a daring one, as your enemies cannot deny," said Mark Randolph.

"Thanks; I have tried to do my duty, and begun by disguising myself and saving the Heron at the breaking out of the war."

"Ha! now all is plain, for your face has haunted me from that night. But, answer me; you accept my hand?"

"Yes. With you, I say—'let the dead past bury its dead.'"

"So be it."

CONCLUSION.

"RICHARD, I tell you the sloop has surrendered. See, the American flag goes up to her peak. Hurrah!"

"It am, sure 'nough! Hoorah, Missy Flora! for that am a terrible victory and no mistake," answered the delighted Dick.

"See, the three vessels are standing in toward the inlet near the villa. I will go down and meet my brother, for I know he is on the brig, and I do not feel that harm has befallen him."

With a brighter face than she had worn for years, Flora galloped toward the villa pier, followed by the delighted Richard.

Upon arriving there, a large number of neighbors, and hundreds of slaves were gathered there, drawn thither by the firing.

"There's a boat coming ashore," cried old Toby, who was among the crowd, with Hannah near him, and as it drew nearer Flora's face flushed with joy as she beheld her brother's well-known face and form. Then she became deadly pale and reeled in her saddle.

She beheld, and recognized the dark face and commanding figure of the man who sat in the stern sheets by the side of her brother.

Springing out on the pier, ringing cheers went up from all, for both men were now recognized; but, raising their hats they forced their way through the crowd, and the next moment Roland St. Leon looked up into the white, but beautiful face of Flora Randolph.

"Will you take my hand, Flora?" and he held it forth.

"Across a grave?" she asked, almost inaudibly.

"Yes."

She grasped the outstretched hand, and thus those two loving hearts were united once more.

Three months after they were married, and the calm had come after the mad tempest.

In a handsome mansion, where Magnolia Villa once stood, now dwell their descendants; but Hammersley Hall has crumbled to dust, its lands are now a forest of trees, but a large, time-worn, moss-grown tomb covers the ashes of that unfortunate man, Henry Leon, and the young wife he lost so soon out of his embittered life.

Still defiant, though crumbling away each year under the touch of time's fatal finger, Storm Castle still stands, the home alone of the sea-bird, yet still looked upon as the Haunted Ruin.

A short while more and it will live only in story.

THE END.

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